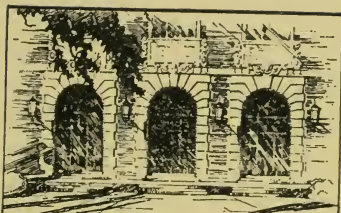


PROPER



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PROPER PRIDE.

A Nobel.

Life may change, but it may fly not ;
Hope may vanish, but can die not ;
Truth be veiled, but still it burneth,
Love repulsed—but it returneth.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON :
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE ST. STRAND.
1882.

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PROPER PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

SIR REGINALD FAIRFAX AT HOME.

“I NEVER knew such an unmitigated young idiot!” exclaimed Sir Reginald the next morning at breakfast, as he tossed aside a letter and tore open a paper with a rustle of impatience.

“You are not alluding to any of the present company, I trust?” asked Geoffrey mildly, as he helped himself lavishly to marmalade.

“No,” returned his cousin, without raising his eyes from the perusal of some

interesting piece of military news, "no, only one of our fellows at the depôt."

"Go on, I'm thirsting for particulars. What has he been doing? Getting married?"

"Setting up a racing-stable," replied Sir Reginald, laying down the paper; "and he knows as much about the turf as—as—" looking round for a simile—"Maurice. He has a horse in for these Sundown Races, on Friday; a new purchase, called"—referring to the note—"Tornado, and has backed him heavily, of course."

"Tornado," echoed Geoffrey; "I know the brute well—a pulling, tearing, mad chestnut. He won the Chester Cup when Langstaffe had him. But he is a real devil to ride. He killed one jockey—bolted into a stable with him—and Langstaffe has had to pay up well for the support of his widow and children. I congratulate your

young friend. Is he going to ride him himself?"

"No. As far as equestrian feats are concerned, he considers discretion to be the mother of all virtues; he will put up a professional of course."

"Well, I hope he may be able to hold him, and keep him within the flags, that's all," returned Geoffrey, with a doubtful shake of the head; "he can gallop and stay like a good 'un, if he chooses, but I'll take odds he bolts."

"I find I have to go to town this morning," said Sir Reginald, addressing himself to the whole circle. "Barker wants me to meet him to-day about some old leases; very probably I shall not come back till to-morrow night."

"Then, my dear Regy, you will bring me down my watch from Benson's," cried Helen eagerly. "And I want some arosane and

crewel wools ; a few dark green and yellow shades to finish——”

“No ; there I draw the line,” he interrupted with a laugh ; “anything but fancy work ! Imagine my going into a wool shop, and being discovered by some of my lady friends ! I dare not trust myself to answer for the consequences.”

“Don’t forget to go to the Army and Navy Stores and order some new tennis bats,” observed Alice, without raising her eyes from an engrossing letter.

“And bring me a couple of boxes of cigarettes, as per usual,” put in Geoffrey.

“Yes ; anything else ?” replied Sir Reginald, entering these items rapidly in his note-book.

“You might bring down another box of books from Mudie’s,” added Helen suavely ; “I’ll just make out a list,” rising and

pushing back her chair and hastening into the next room.

“Well, don’t be long, Helen, as I am going off immediately. You may as well drive over to Manister and leave me at the station, Geoffrey. It will help you to kill your arch-enemy, Time. The trap will be round in ten minutes.”

The next day Sir Reginald, having transacted his business and all the commissions, was strolling down Pall Mall, when he was suddenly brought to a standstill by a vigorous slap on the back, and, turning round, he found himself confronting Captain Vaughan and Captain Campell.

“The very man I want!” exclaimed the latter eagerly.

“How fit you look, old fellow!” cried Captain Vaughan, devouring his late

patient with his eyes and wringing his hand in an agonising grasp.

“When did you come to town? Where are you staying? Come on to the Club and tell us all about yourself,” they chimed alternately.

During luncheon, Mr. Campell ejaculated: “Talk of coincidences! Do you know that, five minutes before we overtook you, Fairfax, I had just sent you a telegram, and, as we turned into Pall Mall, you were almost the first man we saw! Odd, wasn’t it? ‘That’s Fairfax, I bet you a fiver,’ said Vaughan; ‘I could swear to his walk—subdued cavalry swagger.’ And sure enough he was right for once. I’m in a most awful hat this time, and no mistake; and you are the only fellow who can pull me through,” he added, leaning both elbows on the table and

looking at his friend with an air of grave conviction.

“I?” echoed Sir Reginald. “How? What do you mean? I haven’t the faintest glimmering idea of what you are driving at.”

“You know I have a horse in for the Sundown Races?”

A nod was his reply.

“At the last moment—the eleventh hour—my jockey has thrown me over—last night actually—and the race comes off to-morrow. Where am I to get another unless you’ll ride for me?”—imploringly. “If you don’t,” he resumed, “I shall be smashed—horse, foot, and dragoons. Already the horse has fallen tremendously in the betting; but I won’t hedge a far-thing,” with a resolute thump of his fist; “I mean to be a man or a mouse.”

“But why pitch on Fairfax like this?” said Captain Vaughan irritably. “I told you, when you were sending the telegram, how uncommonly cool I thought you. One would think he was gentleman-rider to the regiment. How you have the cheek to ask him to ride such a brute, considering his broken arm and his only just coming off the sick-list, is more than I can understand,” puffing resentfully at his cigar.

“Oh, Fairfax can manage anything. Tornado is not half as bad as that devil of Wyndham’s he rode at Poonah. Riding is child’s play to him.” Turning to Sir Reginald: “You will ride for me, won’t you?” he asked confidently. “If I don’t win this race it will be all U P. I shall have to send in my papers and volunteer as a trooper in one of those Cape regiments.”

“Come, I hope you are not so bad as all that. I must see what I can do ; but I’m not by any means the wonderful jockey you imagine.”

“You will ride him, you will ! I knew it. You were always a brick !” cried Captain Campell ecstatically, jumping up with such energy as to upset his chair with a loud crash.

“For Heaven’s sake, sit down and compose yourself,” exclaimed Captain Vaughan angrily, “unless you want the people to think you are a subject for personal restraint. Fairfax,” turning to his brother-officer with solemnity, “does your wife allow you to ride races ?”

“My wife”—reddening—“allows me to do whatever I please.”

“What a matrimonial *rara avis* !” muttered Captain Vaughan under his breath.

"You will ride for me, Fairfax; I depend on you," said Captain Campell.

"Yes, I'll ride for you, though you have given me awfully short notice; but, remember, I don't guarantee that I'll win."

"Oh, no fear of that if you can only hold him," frankly returned his brother-officer, leaning across the table and volubly expatiating on the horse's merits—age, pedigree, and performances—and giving a long and confidential *résumé* of his temper and traits. "His groom, who knows him well, will give you a wrinkle or two before the race comes off to-morrow. He and the horse started yesterday, and we," indicating Captain Vaughan and himself, "run down to-night. You can't think what a load you have taken off my mind," he added, heaving a deep sigh.

"Have you telegraphed for rooms at the

hotel?" inquired Captain Vaughan, always practical.

"No, by Jove! — I never thought about it."

Little as Sir Reginald was prepared to expose his domestic concerns to public criticism, he felt that it behoved him to extend some hospitality to his two brother-officers—one of them his particular friend, so he exclaimed, with well-feigned cordiality:

"Sundown is in our part of the world—only eight miles from our place. Of course you will both come to Monkswood, and I can drive you over to the races to-morrow."

"Thanks, my dear fellow, we shall be delighted," returned Mr. Campell warmly, "if it won't be putting you out—nor Lady Fairfax?"

"Lady Fairfax will be very glad to see

you. I am going down by the 4.30, and we might travel together. It is now," pulling out his watch, "five minutes past three; I must go and get my traps. Whatever you do, don't be late, Vaughan; I leave you to take charge of Campell, who never was in time in his life—not even for an Indian train."

The two hussars were not a little curious to see Fairfax as a family man. What was his home like? his surroundings? his wife? There must be something odd about her. She had always been shrouded in mystery, but now the veil was about to be pulled aside, and their long-starved curiosity would be satisfied at last!

4.30 found Sir Reginald and his two guests, comfortably settled in a smoking carriage, slowly gliding out of Waterloo Station *en route* for Monkswood; but, owing to a stoppage on the line they

arrived at Manister fully two hours behind time.

“Anything here for me?” inquired Sir Reginald of a gracious porter.

“No, sir; the dog-cart waited till the half-hour and then went home; but Blake said as how he would come for the express.”

“How far is it to your place?” asked Mr. Campell.

“Only two miles and a-half by the fields.”

“Then I vote we walk. Anything is better than a stifling fly this fine warm evening. ‘Quick march’ is the word,” gaily shouldering his umbrella.

His motion was carried unanimously, and, leaving their luggage to be despatched in their wake, they started off at a smart pace, each armed with a cheroot.

The great event of the following day

was the one topic of Mr. Campell's conversation. Sir Reginald lent him a ready ear, and together they made arrangements for an early visit to Tornado the next morning ; they discussed weights, saddles, handicappers, and bits with much animation and enthusiasm, Captain Vaughan walking rather behind them, and smoking sullenly.

"If he's as good as you say, he ought to be first past the post to-morrow, for his company is, after all, only second rate ; and if he does pull off this race I want you to promise me one thing, Campell."

"I'll promise you any earthly thing, my dear fellow," returned Captain Campell impulsively, stopping for an instant in the narrow moonlit path to give full emphasis to his asseveration.

"You will sell Tornado directly the

meeting is over and give up racing for the next five years."

"You may make your mind easy on that score. 'A burnt child dreads the fire;' and I have been badly singed. If I can only pull my chestnuts out all right this time I'll never go near the turf again."

"It is much easier to make good resolutions than to keep them," growled Captain Vaughan from the rear. "If you lose, no doubt it will be all plain sailing for this high resolve of yours; but if you win, it will be another matter. Having once tasted blood, it will be hard to choke off your racing instincts. Why not scratch Tornado to-morrow and commence this reformation before the race?"

"Hear him!" cried Captain Campell

angrily ; “and my four thousand and odd pounds, where would they be? Your advice is no doubt kindly meant, Vaughan ; but we all know that ‘*Il est plus facile d’être sage pour les autres que de l’être pour soi-même.*’ I shall not begin my reformation, as you call it, until the day after to-morrow.”

Half-an-hour’s brisk walking brought the three pedestrians near Monkswood. They crossed the park—how weird it looked in the moonlight !—and the house itself—what an imposing pile ! They traversed the smooth - shaven pleasure - ground and ascended the shallow steps, where wide-open French windows gave forth streams of light and peals of laughter. They looked in, and this is what they saw : A long, low, old-fashioned room, brilliantly lighted and most luxuriously furnished—flowers, pictures, china, caught the eye on every

side. A space had been cleared, and a dancing lesson was evidently in full swing. Close to the window, with her back to them, stood a young lady in a pink dress; beside her a portly middle-aged man was holding out his coat-tails and capering insanely. He was evidently being initiated in the "trois temps" by a lovely girl opposite, in black net, with quantities of natural pale-blush roses pinned into the bodice of her dress and her hair. She was slim, graceful, beautiful, and looked about nineteen. A handsome matron in black satin was playing a waltz mechanically, as she looked over her shoulder at the dancing. An old lady in a monumental cap was peering above her spectacles with intense amusement, and a long-legged youth had thrown himself into a chair in absolute convulsions of laughter. Having at length got breath, he said :

“Go on, Alice ; go on. Show him once more.”

The young lady in black, thus adjured, held up her dress in front and modestly displayed a pair of the prettiest, most fairy-like Louis Quatorze shoes and the slenderest of black silk ankles.

“Now, Mark,” she said authoritatively, “mind this is the *last* time. One foot forward, so ; bring up the other, and turn, so, one, two, three—one, two, three ; nothing can be easier. Are you looking ?”

“Of course he is looking. Do you take him for a fool ? Isn’t he looking at the prettiest pair of ankles in Great Britain ?”

“Geoffrey,” retorted the girl without turning her head, “I’m coming to box your ears directly. Go on, Mark,” she proceeded encouragingly ; “if I could only reach round your waist I’d dance gentleman, and then you would soon get into it.”

Mark accordingly went on according to his lights, and the result was a perfect roar of laughter, in which Sir Reginald joined most heartily, and so betrayed his whereabouts. He and his friends advanced into the room, and he presented them to the girl in black.

“ His wife ! ”

They had barely recovered from their astonishment before she had left the room to see about preparations for them, and to order an impromptu supper, which was speedily organised in a grand old dining-room.

Thither all proceeded, and a merrier party seldom sat down at Monkswood. As lively sallies and witty remarks were rapidly bandied about, and topic after topic was started, discussed, and dismissed, Captains Vaughan and Campell's eyes frequently met.

“Could this be Fairfax’s home, this lovely girl his wife, and these charmingly amusing well-bred people his relations? Then why did he stay in India? Where was the skeleton in the cupboard?”

He was telling a story he had heard in town of an Irish wedding, where, by some blunder, the best man drove off with the bride by mistake. Declaring that to stop was unlucky, nothing would induce the coachman to pull up or turn back. Meanwhile the wretched bridegroom was pursuing them afoot, and running the gauntlet of a score of ragamuffins, who pelted him with stones and mud.

“*You* took precious good care that such a mistake did not occur, Regy!” said Geoffrey with a broad grin. “I had not much chance of driving off with you, Alice, had I? You remember how I wanted to come with you in the carriage from church,

and how he nearly slammed my fingers in the door of the brougham, eh?"

Why did Lady Fairfax become scarlet, and Fairfax assume an air of rapt consideration of the pattern of the tablecloth? Why did they so seldom address each other—what was the meaning of the coolness between them?"

Captain Vaughan made up his mind to watch them narrowly. But Captain Campbell was far too much taken up with the topic nearest his heart to give the subject more than passing attention, and said :

"Lady Fairfax, are you coming to the races to-morrow? Capital races at Sundown."

"N-o—I think not," looking across at her husband interrogatively.

"Oh!" responding to her glance, "*he* is going right enough. He is to ride my horse, don't you know—Tornado. I can't get a jockey, and if I could now I would not

change for the best professional in England."

"Do you mean that my husband is going to ride?" she asked with a quaver of consternation in her voice.

"Yes; it is awfully good of him, is it not?"

"Awfully good of him," she repeated mechanically, her face as white as the cloth.

"Reginald, you are not really going to ride Tornado?" said Geoffrey incredulously. "If you are, I hope you have made your will."

"I have made my will, and I have made up my mind to ride Tornado. Come to the races to-morrow and see him win."

"Or see you killed," replied Geoffrey; "which?"

"You are a Job's comforter with a vengeance. Your remarks are certainly not

calculated to inspire a nervous man with confidence. Let us make a move to the drawing-room," observed Reginald, anxious to avoid further discussion and the objections he sees that Helen and Mark are preparing to hurl at him, and determined to postpone the struggle.

The party in the drawing-room scattered about and broke up into groups of twos and threes. Miss Ferrars and Captain Campell strolled to the piano, and Captain Vaughan laid himself out to improve his acquaintance with Lady Fairfax. As he drew a chair near the table at which she was sitting, she said :

"Captain Vaughan, I am so very glad to see you. I know how much I owe you ; how you nursed my husband through the worst of his illness. I never can sufficiently thank you——"

"Do not," he interrupted, "it is not

necessary. I owe him more than that. You do not know what a blow it would have been to all of us if anything had happened to him. You can't think how much he has made himself beloved by both officers and men."

Alice blushed deeply, and looked far more pleased than if she had received a direct personal compliment.

"I am sure he is," she said in a low voice. "Nevertheless, you must let me thank you. I have often and often longed to do so. I only wish I had some way of showing you how grateful I am," she added, looking at him with dewy wistful eyes.

"What a perfectly bewitching face! What a domestic treasure Reginald has kept quietly buried here! She would more than hold her own with the best 'professionals,'" he mused as he glanced at

her furtively, whilst he pulled his long tawny moustache.

Reginald, and Reginald's exploits, formed the topic of their conversation. His hostess made the very best of listeners, and eagerly drank in all the details of her husband's campaign, his rash adventure, and his illness.

"She is an angel!" thought Captain Vaughan rapturously.

He was by no means a ladies' man. Nevertheless, it was a wholly gratifying sensation to have this lovely young creature hanging on his words, as though his lips were veritably dropping the legendary pearls and diamonds.

Presently the hero of his tale joined them, and, throwing himself into an easy-chair, said, as he crossed his legs :

"We must make an early start to-morrow, Vaughan."

“I suppose so,” responded his friend discontentedly. “I think the whole thing is madness! You are not fit to ride a race. I wonder”—turning abruptly to Alice—“I wonder you allow him to ride, Lady Fairfax.”

“I wish I could prevent him,” she replied, with an appealing look towards her husband.

“Why don’t you enforce your wifely authority?”

The subject of their conversation was apparently engrossed in the contemplation of his exceedingly well-cut boots, and did not seem to hear them.

“Do you hear, Fairfax? Your wife takes my view altogether. You are not to ride to-morrow.”

“My wife,” he replied, looking up and transferring his eyes to her, “knows perfectly well that we never interfere in

each other's affairs. 'Live and let live' is our motto, is it not, Alice?"

"Yes," she responded with a forced smile; but she added timidly: "I do very much wish you would not ride for Mr. Campell, he is a most dangerous animal. You heard what Geoffrey said."

"Said that Mr. Campell was a dangerous animal?" he asked, with a look of comical interrogation.

"No," she replied petulantly; "the horse I mean. Please do not ride him. I will only ask this once," she pleaded earnestly.

"Sorry I can't oblige you, Alice. I have given my word—and you know," he added significantly, "I never break *my* promises."

Alice, deeply hurt, turned away to hide her discomposure, and joined the group at the piano without another word. Captain

Vaughan looked at his friend with unmeasured indignation; certainly he did not shine in home life. There had been a time when he thought no woman under the sun a fitting mate for Sir Reginald Fairfax; but now it appeared to him that Sir Reginald was hardly worthy of his wife!

Could she be the very same Alice to whom, when he thought himself dying, his last words and messages were sent? "Tell her I loved her—always!" Loved her, indeed! He has a curious way of showing it, thought his brother-officer with rising anger.

His looks of unqualified disapproval were entirely thrown away on his friend, who was busily endeavouring to balance a paper-cutter on the tip of one of his fingers, and never once raised his eyes. Captain Vaughan, rising suddenly, and giving his

chair a violent push, that was in itself an angry expostulation, went over to the piano and joined the rest of the party in begging their hostess for just one song.

When all had left the drawing-room, excepting her husband, Alice lingered behind. He was setting the clock on the mantelpiece and did not observe her where she was kneeling, beside the piano, putting away some music. When all the songs and books had been neatly arranged she stole a glance at him. He was standing with his back to the fireplace, just as she had seen him for the first time at Malta ; but oh, how different he was ! He looked sterner and older, and instead of a gay smile there was a hard cynical expression on his lips as he gazed into vacancy.

She felt that she was afraid of him,

but, all the same, she would speak and endeavour to dissuade him from riding for Captain Campell. No matter what he said, no matter how he froze her, she would be heard ; she was his wife.

Rising to her feet, she approached slowly and hesitatingly. Her husband eyed her with cool surprise as she came close up to him.

“Reginald,” she said, “will nothing prevent your riding this race to-morrow?”

“Nothing,” he calmly replied, “unless the horse dies.”

“Could not Burke, the groom, ride him? He was a jockey once,” she asked timidly.

“Burke!” contemptuously. “Burke weighs at least twelve stone. His riding days are over. Why not suggest Mark at once?” with a supercilious smile.

“Could you not get some substitute?”

“No. Pray why should I? Campell

has asked me to ride—I have consented.
Voilà tout.”

“But,” she urged, nervously twisting her bangles, “I do wish you would have nothing to say to him. They say the reason Captain Campell could not get a jockey was that the horse had such a bad name. Say you will not ride him,” she pleaded brokenly. “Do, for *my* sake. I will tell Captain Campell that he must find another jockey, as I will not allow you to ride.”

“I don’t know on what grounds you should ask me to do anything for your sake.”

A silence.

“As to not allowing me to ride,” he continued with polite irony, “I’m afraid I cannot admit your authority.”

He felt he was brutally rude; but in rudeness was his safety. Another such look as she had just given him and he

was a lost man. The farce of "Ward not Wife" would be played out, all his stern resolutions thrown to the winds, and he would have to surrender his pride, his self-respect, his word of honour. She was so close to him that he could feel the perfume of the roses in her hair and see a stray eyelash on her cheek. He moved to one side and, steadily looking at the floor, said :

"I could not break my word to Campell. If Tornado wins to-morrow he has promised me to give up his stud. If he loses, he will be ruined, and will have to sell out. Besides, it is not a steeplechase, only a flat race. Nothing very alarming in that, is there ?"

"Not quite so bad ; but bad enough. The horse did kill one man, why not another ?" looking awfully white.

"Well, if he kills me to-morrow"

(cheerfully), "you can put it in your marriage settlements that your second husband is not to ride races."

Without another word or look, Alice turned and left the room.

"Stay a moment," said her husband, cutting off her indignant retreat across the hall and politely lighting her candle. "Listen to me, Alice.] What will you give me if, after to-morrow, I promise never to ride another race?" looking at her with serious eyes.

"Will you promise me that" (eagerly) "really and truly?" accepting the candlestick. "Then it is to be a bargain, remember."

"How can it be a bargain, as you call it, if the transaction is to be all on one side? If I promise this, what are you going to do for me?" he asked with questioning gaze.

“Promise, and I’ll tell you,” she said archly.

“Well,” speaking slowly and with grave expectation in his eyes, “I promise; and what then?”

“Then, if you like,” she replied, blushing furiously and holding her candle well between his face and hers, “then I’ll—I’ll give you a kiss.”

“A kiss!” he stammered, very much taken aback. “A kiss,” he repeated, reddening; for a second he hesitated, then said in a low voice, as he turned to take up his candle: “No, thank you, Alice.”

Alice seized the opportunity to make her escape, and when her husband had turned his head she was gone.

“After that,” he muttered to himself as he leisurely ascended the stairs, “I can resist anything. I have put St. Anthony himself completely in the shade. His

temptress was not a quarter as pretty as mine, I'll swear. But if I had taken it I should have had to take a dozen, and thus lay down my arms. Better as it is, better as it is; I'm not likely to be tempted in the same way twice," he added with a sigh.

Meanwhile Alice had fled along the long corridor and locked herself in her dressing-room. "No, thank you, Alice," was still ringing in her ears. She sat with her face buried in her hands for nearly a quarter of an hour. To have offered a kiss to a man and been refused, even though that man was her husband, what shame, what indignity! Her very throat and forehead were dyed with blushes as she thought of it. "What does he mean? Why does he treat me so? He dislikes me, that is very evident. Am I uglier, less attractive than I used to be? Did he marry me *only* for

my pretty face, and am I pretty no longer ? ” she asked herself as she looked into her glass. But no, the glass declared she was prettier than ever, as, with both elbows on the table, she studied her reflection critically, and saw clouds of lovely golden-brown hair, perfect features, a flawless skin, over which the blushes were chasing each other rapidly. “ I am as pretty as ever,” she said to herself dispassionately. “ Can he be a little wrong in his head ? ” she mused. “ Can his wounds and the Indian sun have affected his reason ? Mad people always evince a dislike to their nearest and dearest ; but no, impossible. Reginald mad ? she must be insane herself to think so ; and oh, doubly, trebly mad to have put herself in the way of meeting such a rebuff as she had received that evening.”

CHAPTER II.

CARDIGAN.

THE next morning all was bustle and confusion at Monkswood; the Mayhews and Miss Ferrars had decided to go to the races, and the high-stepping, supercilious-looking carriage-horses were to do a good day's work for once.

Nothing would induce Alice to join the party, but she busied herself all the morning looking after the cold luncheon which was to be taken to the course, and helping Helen and Mary to make gorgeous race toilettes. By mutual consent, she and her

husband had carefully avoided each other, but just as the latter was about to start, he discovered that a button was coming off his light overcoat. The dog-cart, in which Captain Campell was already seated, was waiting at the door, and there was not a moment to be lost.

“Call Alice,” cried the ever-officious Geoffrey; “she has just mended me. There she is in the hall.”

“Alice, come here with your needle.”

Alice, entering the library, found that she had to operate on her husband this time, which was more than either of them had bargained for; but there was no help for it, with Captain Vaughan and Geoffrey standing by. She had scarcely commenced her task ere they left the room and went out to the dog-cart, leaving her alone with Reginald. She ventured to steal a glance at him, he stood still as a statue, without

so much as the flickering of an eyelash, whilst her fingers trembled a good deal, and her heart beat so loudly she was afraid he could hear it. As he had not removed his coat they were brought into uncommonly close contact, and the top of her head was dangerously near to his moustache. Very quickly and silently she stitched, without again raising her eyes. Through his open coat she perceived his scarlet silk racing-jacket and faultless breeches and boots.

“What are you looking so serious about?” he suddenly asked. “Why are you so pale? There is no occasion to keep up appearances; we are alone. Pray don’t feign anxiety about me—that you really don’t feel; you know very well you don’t care a straw whether I break my neck or not.”

He was in a merciless humour; many

sleepless hours had he brooded on his wrongs, and wrath and contempt were uppermost.

Alice made no reply, but having sewn on the button, twisted the thread off with a sharp snap.

"Well, good-bye," he said, holding out a dogskin-covered hand and looking at her keenly. "Don't overact the part. At present you are superb. Any bystander now would be fool enough to think—— that you cared for me. You and I know better than *that*, don't we?" he added, with a curious smile, as he opened his cigar-case and carefully selected a cheroot.

"Rex, are you coming?" shouted Geoffrey. In another moment he had taken his seat in the dog-cart, the pawing, fiery chestnut had "got his head," and the trio were bowling down the avenue at a liberal ten miles an hour.

Alice stood in the window for fully twenty minutes; her lips trembled, her bosom heaved.

“How dared he! How dared he!” she whispered, as the blood mounted to her pale face, and her whole frame quivered with anger at his taunts. But her indignation, as was usually the case, quickly died away—it gave place to “apprehension’s sudden glow.” “Supposing he was brought home badly hurt—or dead? Supposing that those dark eyes, that had just now looked at her so scornfully, were closed for ever ere nightfall?” The very idea was more than she could bear. She would busy herself all day, and not give herself time to think.

Drying her eyes, she ran upstairs, and helped Helen and Mary to put the finishing touches to their toilettes; and pressed on Mary a perfect parasol, arranged Helen’s

bonnet and veil satisfactorily, and saw them off from the hall-door steps with many smiles and good wishes.

Although Alice wore a smiling face in public, and her gaiety and buoyant spirits were the amazement of Helen and her aunt, yet her heart was heavy enough, and when alone, escorted by the dogs, strolling through the woods with idle aimless footsteps, her face was very downcast and sad. The task of regaining her husband's affection seemed to be altogether beyond her; all her advances were coldly repulsed; she would venture no farther. Perhaps were she to emulate his own studied indifference, he might think more of her.

Men never cared for what was easily gained; probably he despised her for her humility. Well, she would assert herself, and meet him on his own ground as a last resource. "He pleases himself;

I shall please myself, and I shall ride Cardigan this very afternoon," she said aloud, as she entered the hall and flung her hat on a chair.

Sundown races were very popular, and the present meeting augured a great success. The stand was crowded, and the course at either side was lined three deep with carriages, gay with bonnets and parasols. Every small eminence and every box-seat was seized as a coign of vantage.

As the big race of the day was about to be run, five starters emerged from the paddock, slender and sleek-coated, mounted by jockeys gorgeous in every colour of the rainbow.

Tornado's appearance excited considerable sensation as he took his preliminary canter. He was a remarkably handsome animal,

and was handled to admiration by his jockey.

“Who is the fellow riding him?” asked one of the Steepshire magnates. “Seems to know what he is about. That brute takes a lot of riding.”

“It’s ten to one if he does not bolt,” replied a supremely horsey little man. “If he could be kept on the course he’d run away with the race, but he has a nasty awkward temper and a gentleman jock riding him. Precious little good his four pounds will do him in this case. They are making Dado a hot favourite.”

“Who is the gentleman jock?” reiterated his companion.

On reference to the correct card, they saw “Captain Campell’s Tornado; scarlet jacket, black cap, Sir Reginald Fairfax.”

“By Jove!” exclaimed a pompous D.L.,

“who would expect to see him here? Good-looking fellow—wonder he likes to come into the neighbourhood, considering all things. Wonder where he is stopping?”

The flag dropped to a capital start, and they were off, Tornado making a determined but useless attempt to bolt. Those wrists that were guiding him were of steel, and kept him on the course willy-nilly. He had his master on his back, he soon discovered; his runaway tendency was turned to good account, for his rider, knowing him to be a stayer, forced him through the other horses, and cut out the work at a terrific pace, which he kept up throughout, having a clear lead halfway up the straight, and winning easily by six lengths.

Sir Reginald, who was now recognised by many of the neighbouring gentry and farmers, who remembered him a lad on his

pony, was cheered loudly as he piloted his horse through the crowd to the weighing-stand. Some of the neighbouring *élite* came up and claimed his acquaintance, and overpowered him with congratulations. He received them with a distant politeness none knew how to assume better than himself, and declining various offers of luncheon, arm-in-arm with the radiant Captain Campell, made his way to the Fairfax landau, where he was received as a hero indeed. *This* victory was something palpable, and Helen felt a pleasing consciousness that their carriage was the cynosure of many eyes and many opera-glasses, as her cousin shared the box-seat with Mary Ferrars.

“Where is she?” was whispered behind more than one fan among the ladies on the stand. “How odd it is that he should have come into the neighbourhood! How hand-

some he is, and how much he is to be pitied, poor fellow !”

The “ poor fellow ” made a capital luncheon, lost several pairs of gloves to the two ladies, and suddenly announced his intention of going home.

“ Going home ? ” echoed Geoffrey ; “ why there are two more races on the card. You are not serious ? ” he said, gazing at him with might and main.

“ I am, indeed ; the best of the day is over, and I want to get off before the crowd begins to make a rush. You can all stay if you like.”

“ I’ll go with you,” said Captain Vaughan ; “ I’m sick of races, and we will jog home quietly and escape the dust.”

Well he guessed his friend’s intention—he was going home to set his wife’s mind at rest, and he *was*. Her pale face and trembling fingers had risen up more than

once reproachfully before his mind's eye, and he felt both remorseful and penitent for his undoubted rudeness. Cautiously steering through the crowd, they were soon on their road home, smoking and discussing the events of the day as they trotted through the cool country lanes; both had the pleasing inward conviction that they were doing the "right thing."

Within a mile of Monkswood the sound of a horse galloping close by in a field arrested their attention. Soon he came in sight—a powerful raking chestnut, ridden by a lady. Pulling him up gradually to a canter, she trotted him up to a hog-backed stile, over which she landed him in the most workmanlike manner into the road, a hundred yards ahead of the dog-cart, which evidently was a vehicle not to his taste, for the instant he caught sight of it he turned

sharp round and bolted in the opposite direction.

The lady was Alice, the horse Cardigan. In two minutes she had reduced him to obedience, and, returning at a trot, ranged up alongside of the dog-cart. Her light hand seemed to have a wonderfully soothing effect on the fiery fretting chestnut. She had evidently given him a good gallop, if one was to judge by the state of heat he was in and the lather on his sides, and so subdued his exuberant impulses, but his wild eye and nervous ears spoke volumes : " Only for the lady on my back," they said, " I would think very little of jumping into that dog-cart."

" So you have come back ?" exclaimed Alice cheerfully, " and not on a shutter," with a glance at her husband.

" So you see," he replied shortly.

"After all, it was only a flat race! I need not have been so frightened. Did you win?"

"He did, splendidly! by six lengths, hands down," replied Captain Vaughan enthusiastically. "You ought to have been there to see for yourself, Lady Fairfax. There has been capital racing."

"What has brought you home so early?" she asked, not noticing his suggestion.

"Oh, we had had enough of it; the best races had been run, and we thought we would get away before the crowd."

"Alice," said her husband, suddenly tossing away his cigar, "I thought I had forbidden you to ride Cardigan?"

"Did you!" she replied airily; "just in the same way that I *forbid* you to ride races," and she laughed as she leant over and patted Cardigan's neck. "'Live and

let live' is our motto, is it not, Captain Vaughan?"

"*You* won't live long, at any rate, if you persist in riding that brute," returned her husband angrily.

"He calls you a brute, Mr. C.; do you hear that? You and I understand each other perfectly," she said, stooping forward again and patting his hard neck, thereby more fully displaying her perfect figure and her perfectly-cut habit.

"You have torn your glove, Lady Fairfax. Why, the whole palm is gone!" exclaimed Captain Vaughan.

"Oh, it's nothing," she replied, looking at it hurriedly, but not before a deep red weal across her delicate white palm was visible to both gentlemen.

"He pulls a good bit, does he not?" asked Captain Vaughan dubiously.

"A little, when he is fresh; but he

knows me. All the grooms are afraid of him, and he knows that; but I'm not a bit afraid of you, am I?" addressing herself once more to her steed, and emphasizing her remark with a touch of her whip.

His reply was a plunge that would have unseated a less experienced rider. Another touch of the whip—another plunge.

Captain Vaughan looked askance at his friend. For a man who had just won a race, on an awkward horse, in a first-class manner, he looked decidedly nervous. Never had Captain Vaughan seen fear written on Reginald Fairfax's face till now, and there it was plainly to be seen, as Cardigan executed plunge after plunge before them down the road. Subdued at last by his mistress's voice, they again joined the dog-cart.

"Alice," said her husband, administering a wicked but quiet cut to the dog-cart

horse, "you'll never ride Cardigan again after to-day."

"Oh, shan't I? Who is to prevent me?" she asked, innocent wonder depicted on her pretty face.

"I will," he replied emphatically.

"Do not be too sure of that," she returned, with a smile at Captain Vaughan that exasperated her husband beyond description. "Farewell for the present; here is a lovely piece of turf," and with a careless wave of her hand she turned off the avenue and was soon galloping away across the park at the top of Cardigan's speed.

The two young men watched her in dead silence till she disappeared behind a clump of trees.

"By Jove, how she rides!" exclaimed Captain Vaughan in a tone of enthusiastic admiration.

“Vaughan,” said his friend solemnly, as he withdrew his eyes from the vanishing horsewoman, “let me give you a piece of advice; take it as coming from one who speaks from experience. Whatever folly—whatever madness you may be guilty of, be warned by me, and *never marry!*”

CHAPTER III.

“A KISS, AND NOTHING MORE.”

MR. AND MRS. MAYHEW had gone on a visit to some friends at the other end of the county, and the young people, left to their own devices, instituted a riding-party into Manister. Alice was mounted on a new purchase—a perfect animal in appearance and manner—a bay mare with black points, who fully justified the name she had brought with her—“Look at Me”—and the three hundred guineas Sir Reginald had paid to her late owner. Cardigan he reserved for himself, and

Cardigan, in mad spirits, kept plunging and shying and indulging in formidable antics all the way down the avenue, setting an infamous example to the other horses.

“I must take it out of this fellow,” said his master, sending him at a low fence that separated the road from a long series of large grass fields.

In another instant Look at Me was beside him. Together they galloped the length of three or four fields, their riders just steadying them at their fences, which consisted of one or two low hedges, a couple of sheep hurdles, and a semi-Irish bank.

The pace, the breeze, and, above all, the exhilarating exercise, made Alice's spirits rise to quite their former standard. With brilliant cheeks and sparkling eyes she looked the Alice of other days.

Bringing his horse to a walk, and casting

an approving glance at his companion, her husband said :

"I see you ride as well as ever, Alice, if not better !"

"I am fonder of it, if that is anything," she replied, giving her habit a businesslike twitch. "It's the only thing I care for in the way of amusement. I seem to be able to ride away from myself, to forget all my troubles, and to be Alice Saville once more."

"You would like to be Alice Saville again, no doubt," said her husband quietly, looking at her steadily.

No answer.

"Alice, did you hear me ?" leaning towards her and placing his hand on her horse's crest.

"Yes, I heard you. You are not my father confessor, be pleased to remember," she replied, closing her lips resolutely. She

felt an insane desire to tease him, and proceeded : " Perhaps, if you tell me two or three things, I will tell you."

" Go on, then. What do you wish to know ?"

" In the first place, am I as pretty as I was as Alice Saville ?"

" Really—I—I have never given the subject a thought." (Oh Reginald !)

" Well ; go on. I'm waiting."

" Yes"—looking at her boldly and taking in every item of her fair high-bred face, mischievous smile, and lovely laughing eyes—" I suppose you are."

What a rude, indefinite way of putting it !

" Is my riding as good as ever ?"

" Yes," most emphatically.

" Is my temper improved ?"

" How can I tell ? I have had no practical demonstration of one of your

passions as yet. But I should say—your temper was now as equable and unruffled as the corn in that field."

"How is *yours*?" abruptly.

"Mine! Much as usual, thank you," with an amused, superior smile.

"Well, now, as you have answered my questions, it is only fair to answer yours."

"Yes," he replied, looking at her eagerly.

"I would rather"—emphasizing every word—"be Alice *Somebody* than anyone else in the whole world. *Now* are you much wiser?" she added, giving him a mischievous glance.

"Of course! I KNOW, Alice, although you won't tell me. But even if we had never met, you would not be Alice Saville now; so what is the good of wishing for your maiden-name? You would have been married long ago—subject to my

consent," with a sardonic smile he could not express.

"We *were* very happy once, Reg," she said with a deep sigh. "Neither of us had tempers—once. Have you forgotten?"

He has not forgotten; he never can forget. Nevertheless, he abruptly put an end to her reminiscences, saying:

"Alice, there is nothing to be gained by referring to the past, nothing but pain. My past is dead and buried; the sooner you put yours under the ground the better. *Never* allude to our married life again. Let it be as though it had never been; it was a *fiasco*, a MISTAKE! We have only to deal with the present and the future."

"The present and the future," she echoed, choking back her tears.

The sound of their horses' hoofs on the soft springy turf was the only sound

that broke the silence for more than ten minutes. Presently she said :

“What is *your* future?—what are you going to do?”

“I mean to have a look at Looton, a winter’s hunting in the shires, and to return to India in the spring.”

“To India!” she gasped. “Reginald, does it ever, *ever* strike you how cruel you are to me?”

“Cruel!” he echoed, looking into her wistful beautiful eyes with stern self-command. “God help you, Alice, if I was ever as cruel to you as you have been to me. Come,” he added, putting his horse into a canter, “here is the lane to the Manister road; we had better get on.”

Somehow, Alice’s attempts at explanation or reconciliation were always failures. Her husband declined to meet her halfway.

He looked so cold and so unsympathetic that the words that came trembling to her lips died away unspoken, frozen into silence by the icy chilliness of his demeanour. Firm and intrepid resolutions she had made to brave him came to nothing when she found herself alone with him face to face. He would talk on any other topic but themselves—their past. He cantered up the lane in front of her without even turning his head. Had he glanced backwards, he would have seen what would have surprised him considerably — Alice hastily searching in the saddle-pocket for her handkerchief and furtively wiping away some distinctly visible tears.

The long grass lane terminated in a locked gate—a gate opening on the Manister road — over which Cardigan showed the way in gallant style, closely followed by the bay and blue habit.

"Oh how pretty ! How easy it looks !" exclaimed Mary Ferrars, as she and Geoffrey trotted up just in time to witness the performance.

"It's not often you see a married couple ride like *that*," returned Geoffrey complacently, "and it's just the only subject on which they agree."

They all rode into the town together, where they again divided—Geoffrey and Mary to go to the confectioner's—an errand for Maurice—Alice and Reginald to despatch a telegram. When they came to the post-office, two carriages were already drawn up, containing some of the Steepshire *monde*.

They favoured Alice and her cavalier with an impertinent stare, or looked over her head with fixed attention.

One old lady adjusted her pince-nez, and amused herself by staring Alice out of countenance.

When her husband had despatched the telegram he came out, and saw at a glance the contemptuous looks levelled at his wife, her burning cheeks and downcast eyes. In a second he grasped the situation, and turning on the carriages a look of scathing indignation, he mounted his horse, and, unintentionally ramming in the spurs, that fiery animal became almost unmanageable, and, rearing erect, nearly overbalanced into one of the landaus; but having regained his equilibrium, went plunging violently down the street.

“Who is the young man she has the effrontery to ride with?” asked the old lady with the glasses.

“Don’t know, I’m sure. Looks like a cavalry man,” responded her daughter languidly. “Better ask Smith.”

Mr. Smith, postmaster, who was standing at his shop-door, looking after the

equestrians, and briskly rubbing his hands, said, in reply to her question :

"Certainly, ma'am, certainly," clearing his throat and preparing to deliver what he knows will be a startling announcement. "You mean the gentleman on the chestnut horse, just turning into Market Street?"

An eager nod of assent.

"That is Sir Reginald, Lady Fairfax's husband."

"Impossible!"

"Well, ma'am, he has just sent off a telegram in that name."

Sensation !

As the Monkswood party were leaving the town they encountered a very dashing victoria and pair, which stopped, and Alice was beckoned to by a sprightly dark-eyed lady with a rose-lined parasol.

"My *dear* Lady Fairfax, this is most apropos ! I have been over to Monkswood

to tell you that I won't take *any* refusal, but must insist on you and Miss Ferrars coming to my dance on Wednesday. You will stay and sleep of course. The excuse you gave was most frivolous and ridiculous."

"Many thanks, Lady Rufford. Let me introduce my husband, who has just returned from India."

Lady Rufford received the dark *distingué*-looking gentleman who was presented to her with effusion, and plied him with questions more or less embarrassing. Before they parted it was agreed that they would all be present at her ball without fail.

Alice and Geoffrey dropped behind together, on the way home, exchanging lively sallies and critical observations.

"I say, Alice, doesn't it look as if Rex was getting up a strong flirtation with Miss Ferrars? What is he leaning over, and saying to her? Are you jealous?"

"Don't be absurd, Geoff."

"I suppose you think Rex can't flirt, you pretty little confiding innocent! *Can't* he though! They used to say that when he did go in for it, which was seldom enough, he could give any fellow a week's start with a girl and cut him out after all."

"I don't believe a word of it," commencing to trot.

"Oh, you can please yourself about that. Remember you are warned. Come along, and let us interrupt their *tête-à-tête* before your domestic peace is wholly destroyed."

Riding close up behind the other pair he sang:

"Will you walk a little faster,
Said a whiting to a snail,
There's a lobster close behind me,
And he's treading on my tail.

“Miss Ferrars,” he continued, “there’s a glorious bit of turf; come and have a canter.”

This well-meant effort had no effect in readjusting the party; they all started together, and the ride was completed by a spirited neck-and-neck race between Alice and Geoffrey across the park.

The same evening, after dinner, it being a splendid moonlight night, they all strolled out about the pleasure-ground, except Miss Saville, who had too much regard for her rheumatic old bones. The French windows in the drawing-room opened on a terrace which led down by a flight of steps to a broad gravel walk. Mary and Reginald had come in, and were standing just inside the open window. Alice and Geoffrey had lingered behind, quarrelling, as usual. They could hear their fresh young voices coming up the walk in high argument. Reaching

the steps, Alice sat down on the lowest and said :

"Now, Geoff, a truce to nonsense. Be a good boy, and I'll tell your fortune with this daisy."

"I'd much rather you would give me a kiss," he replied, stealing a black arm round her taper white waist.

Mary felt Reginald, who was standing close to her, wince. "Ah, my friend," she thought, "you are not altogether so cold or indifferent as you seem !"

Alice, perfectly unconscious of the close proximity of her cousin's arm, went on :

"He loves me—a little, very much, passionately ; not at all, a little, very much. She loves you—*very much*. I was sure of it ! The red-haired girl at Southsea. It's all very well to know the state of *her* affections, but you must not think of

it. I would never give my consent—never, much less a wedding present.”

“I would a great deal rather have a kiss now, my pretty little cousin.”

“What on earth put kisses into your head, you ridiculous boy?”

“*You!*” said he, drawing her towards him and endeavouring to imprint a salute on her fair cheek.

But he reckoned without his hostess. Like lightning she sprang to her feet and confronted him with flaming cheeks and dilated eyes.

“How dare you forget yourself? How—how dare you insult me—me, a married woman? If you *had* kissed me I should have considered myself degraded indeed, and never spoken to you again as long as I lived.”

“Indeed!” sarcastically; “what a loss!”

“What do you mean by such conduct,

sir?" stamping her foot. Her breast was heaving, her hands trembling. She looked, and she was, in a towering passion.

"What a little cat you are! What a little fury! No *wonder* Rex had a rough time of it. What harm if I did kiss you, my own sweet-tempered first cousin?" said Geoffrey. "I often kiss Dolly and Mary Saville—and why not you?"

"It would have been an outrage. No one ever has, ever shall kiss me, except—except——" she stammered.

"Except—how many? Don't be bashful."

"Except Reginald, of course," she replied with passionate vehemence.

"What a good joke! You don't really say so?" he exclaimed with a sneering laugh. "By all accounts *he* has never had many of your kisses. He wouldn't be *bothered* with them," proceeded this

extremely aggravating youth. "He would rather be leading a squadron of cavalry than kissing the prettiest girl in England; and he is not such a dog in the manger as to refuse me a few of what he never takes himself."

"Let me pass, sir!" cried Alice, sweeping him aside and dashing up the steps, where she found herself face to face with her husband and Mary. "Eavesdroppers!" she exclaimed with a start.

"Quite unintentionally so," replied Mary. "And at any rate you have not committed yourself in any way."

"More than you can say for Geoffrey!" cried Alice, giving him a glance of ineffable contempt as he leisurely ascended the steps, not the least disconcerted by the situation.

"He only meant it as a joke, or at least as a mark of cousinly affection," said Reginald, who, *had* Geoffrey succeeded in

robbing Alice of a kiss, would have probably acted in a manner that would have surprised them both considerably. Fortunately, Geoffrey had been baffled, those pure sweet lips were still sacred to him; Alice was as loyal to him as he had been to her. The mere thought of this opened his heart to all the world, Geoffrey included.

"Forgive him this once," Reginald said, "and I'll be surety it never occurs again."

"*You* take his part then?" she retorted hotly.

The more indignant she was the more her husband's spirits rose.

"Pardon me, I said nothing of taking anyone's part; but I am quite certain that Geoffrey will never offend again."

Seeing that Alice made no reply, and looked anything but appeased as she stood tapping one foot impatiently on the flags:

“Shall I,” he continued, with one of his old and now very rare smiles, “parade Geoffrey at twelve paces to-morrow on the tennis-ground? I’m afraid there will be some difficulty about weapons and seconds. My revolver and Maurice’s pop-gun are the only pistols available. We might toss for the revolver, eh, Geoffrey?”

“Oh, of course, if you are going to treat the whole thing as a jest,” broke in Alice indignantly, “there is no more to be said,” turning away to enter the house.

“Come, Alice,” interposed her husband more seriously, “be sensible, be reasonable. Do you wish me to treat the matter as anything but a *joke*?” he asked, looking at her fixedly, and dropping his voice so as to be heard by her ear alone. Then resuming his former tone he went on: “It would never do to allow such good friends to quarrel; permit me to patch up

a truce, if not a lasting peace, between you and Geoffrey. Let me see you seal the reconciliation by shaking hands."

"I shall *not* shake hands with him," responded Alice, drawing herself up. "Let him beg my pardon first," putting her hands behind her and looking the picture of offended dignity.

"Here goes then," returned Geoffrey, taking out his handkerchief and spreading it on the terrace with careful deliberation; then, dropping on it in a kneeling posture, with uplifted hands, he was commencing a long oration, in a whining tone.

"Go away—don't speak to me! You turn everything into ridicule," cried Alice hotly.

"See how I am snubbed, Miss Ferrars," he observed, rising, and dusting the knees of his trousers; "all because I wanted to kiss my cousin! Where was the harm? Don't all your cousins kiss you?"

“I’m not bound to answer such an impertinent question,” replied Mary, laughing.

“Well, never mind. Suppose you take me for a nice little moonlight walk, and give me your confidence. I am afraid to stay here,” waving his handkerchief towards Alice.

In another moment they had descended the steps together, leaving Alice and her husband alone.

The former made an earnest effort for composure as she stood for some moments gazing out on the woods, which lay black and silver in the moonlight. Presently she turned and looked at her husband. He was leaning against the window-frame, the white background of which brought into bold relief the strength and symmetry of his figure. He was looking at her intently, with an amused smile on his lips.

A horrible thought that smile suggested to Alice's excited brain. He was laughing at her in his sleeve ; he had told Geoffrey ! The very idea made her giddy.

"Alice, I began to think you had forgotten how to fly into a passion. I see I was mistaken."

"You were," defiantly, measuring him from head to foot. "I was mistaken also ; I thought you were a gentleman."

A momentary, almost imperceptible start, and then he replied coldly :

"I thought so, too."

"But you are not." A dead silence.
"You know it is true."

"Of course," he replied icily, "whatever you say is undeniable. Once you told me you despised and detested me ; now I am no gentleman. So be it. You have no objection to smoking, as well as I can remember ?"

Provoked beyond all bounds by his perfect sangfroid, she said :

“Shall I tell you why you are no gentleman ?”

“If it will not be giving you too much trouble,” carefully nursing a newly-lighted match.

“Because you have told Geoffrey. You heard what he said just now ?”

“Told Geoffrey !” he exclaimed in much amazement. “Pray explain yourself. You are speaking in riddles, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Told him about the other evening—before the races ; it was too shameful. Oh, you might have spared me !” covering her face with her hands.

A dead silence. At last his answer came in a cold formal voice.

“If I had done what you imagine, I certainly would richly deserve to forfeit

the name of gentleman. I am surprised that even you" (with scathing emphasis) "should ask me to vindicate myself from such a charge. I have not told Geoffrey—strange as it may appear to you—and am sorry that after *all* you should have such a mean opinion of me still."

Alice removed her hands, but averted her face as she said :

"You did not tell him? Then what could he mean?"—hesitatingly.

"Am I responsible for Geoffrey's random remarks?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, no, of course not. Please forgive me, Reginald; I did you a great injustice!" looking at him with lovely deprecating eyes. "Do?" she pleaded.

"You know very well, Alice," he answered earnestly, "that I could forgive you anything. You have only to ask, and it is granted."

"Surely," he thought to himself, "this is a broad hint with a vengeance."

"A mere *façon de parler*," said Alice to herself; "a kind of Chinese compliment! Forgive anything! A likely thing, when my one fault still remains a huge unerasable blot in his eyes."

After a moment's silence she turned towards him with a pretty little shiver.

"Are you cold?" he asked formally. (Oh, why will she not seize this blessed opportunity?)

"No, not actually cold. I believe it's a goose walking over my grave—you know the tradition," she answered with a laugh. "Well," as he remained silent, "if you are not going to say 'Happy goose,' like the young man in *Punch*, perhaps you will be so kind as to bring me my red shawl; it's on one of the chairs in the hall."

So much for his hints and hopes.

Wrapped in the shawl, as a preventive against further shivering, Alice and her husband promenaded up and down the terrace for nearly an hour, although it seemed to them no longer than a quarter of the time, talking of India chiefly. He told her about his regiment, his friends, his horses and dogs, his native servants, delighted to share his thoughts and experiences with her who was, in spite of everything, dearer to him than life itself. The interest she manifested made him talk of himself more freely than he had done for years, and then with her alone. To her eager questions about the African campaign—his glories, his decorations, and his wounds—his answers were but brief and unsatisfactory; but he dwelt on the successes of his comrades-in-arms with generous and eloquent enthusiasm. And Alice, glad that he should talk to her

as of old, on any subject, and hardly able to realise the present brief happy moment, lent a greedy ear to whatever narrative he was pleased to relate.

So absorbed were they that the other couple arrived at the foot of the steps unnoticed.

“Rex,” cried Geoffrey, “is she cool? Is it safe for me to come up?”

“Quite safe. She accords you a free pardon.”

“Reginald!” she exclaimed, “how *can* you say so?”

“You are bound to forgive him; I forgave that old lady for you the other day—you owe me a free pardon for Geoffrey.”

“Oh, but that was different. She—she——”

“She did not want to kiss him, did she?” put in Geoffrey the irrepressible. “He never would have forgiven *that*, be sure!”

When the ladies had gone to bed, Reginald took a turn up and down the terrace, solus : "I cannot make her out," he said to himself as he knocked the ashes off his cheroot. "At times, such as this evening for instance, I could almost imagine that the past was a bad dream, nothing more. It's a curious thing that my own wife is the only woman who has ever puzzled me. One day she says we are to be strangers, the next friends ; one day a cool shake hands, another a kiss. We spent an hour in a fool's paradise to-night—at any rate I did. I would be an idiot indeed if I took it for the real thing I seemed so sure of once—paradise without the fool."

CHAPTER IV.

BAD NEWS.

THE next day was Sunday, and all the party went to church together in the open carriage. Alice, in a lovely white bonnet, a mass of ostrich feathers, sat opposite to Geoffrey, who, after carefully inspecting her, patronisingly remarked :

“That is a most touching construction on your head, Alice, and *not* unbecoming. Have yourself painted for the next Academy, ‘Lady in a Bonnet.’”

“How ridiculous ! Fancy *me* in the Royal Academy !”

“Why not? Are you above it, like the old lady who said ‘she would not mind being painted for the Academy, but would wait till she went to Rome and have herself done by one of *the old masters*.’”

“I believe you spend your time making up these stories, Geoffrey. Here we are—now hand me down nicely; don’t haul me out as you generally do.”

“You want to show off your new boots; I know your vanity,” he retorted as he sprang out.

The church being central was fuller than most country churches, and attended by many of the county families. As the Monkswood party walked up the aisle every eye was turned on them with unconcealed curiosity. With Lady Fairfax’s appearance all were familiar, but which of these two young men was the roving husband? “The elder of the two,

of course ; he was dark and bronzed, and looked like a soldier ; the other was a youth." N.B.—Geoffrey, although three-and-twenty, looked about nineteen.

The Fairfaxes formed a topic of discourse at many a luncheon-table that day.

"Did you see Lady Fairfax in church, and her husband ?" said one young lady.

"How do you know which was her husband, or if he was there at all ?" replied her mother, who, with bonnet-strings thrown back, was making an ample meal. "I don't believe he has come back one bit."

"Oh, but he has," persisted her daughter ; "their coachman told Brown ; he arrived last Monday, and that was him sitting next the door."

"Pray how do you know ?"

"Because he found the hymns for her, and gave her a hassock."

"Weighty reasons certainly. It is much

more likely, from what you say, that he is *not* her husband. You never see your father finding my place or giving me a footstool," returned the old lady, as she tossed off a glass of sherry and looked round as much as to say, "This argument is a clincher."

"Well, but when the offertory-bag came round I saw her get very red, as if she had forgotten her purse, and he slipped a sovereign into her hand."

"And that's conclusive, you think?" said her mother.

"Pray may I inquire how you saw all this byplay?" asked her brother.

"I was sitting right behind them, and made good use of my eyes, as usual—that's all."

"Well," responded the youth, pushing away his plate, "I don't care who he is, but I should like to know who his tailor is. He was uncommonly well got up. I

never saw a better-built coat," he added with fervour.

"I expect the block had something to say to it. It might not look so well on shoulders like a champagne-bottle," returned his sister, looking at him amiably.

Leaving them to the impending battle, we return to Monkswood, and find our friends also at luncheon.

"What disgraceful singing! I never heard a less unanimous choir; everyone for himself it seemed to me, time and tune being quite beneath notice," remarked Geoffrey.

"It is splendid to what it used to be when I was a boy," replied Sir Reginald; "we had a kind of orchestra composed of a fiddle and a flute."

"Did any of you see me?" asked Alice, appealing to the company. "Every time I knelt down and leant forward the jet fringe on the jacket of the lady in front, who

would sit bolt upright, became entangled in the feathers of my bonnet. At one time it threatened to be quite serious. I was afraid I should have had to have slipped off my bonnet and left it behind."

"No, I did not remark you," responded Geoffrey. "But did you see the old buffer with the white waistcoat exactly under the pulpit? Miss Ferrars has taken such a fancy to him. She never took her eyes off him, and whispered to me during the sermon, 'That she would rather be an old man's darling than a young man's slave.'"

"Mr. Saville, how can you?"

"*He* might not suit," pursued Geoffrey unabashed, "but I'll look out for another old gentleman for you, very old, very infirm, and very rich—the most tender and assiduous care during his lifetime guaranteed, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I have no intention of marrying at present, many thanks for your kind offer."

"Well, perhaps you are right," returned Geoffrey calmly. "I myself am inclined to agree with the Frenchman who said, 'Three weeks' paradise, thirty years' war!' Married people always fight either quietly at home, which is the most *deadly*, or publicly, which is the most amusing."

"Really, Geoffrey," said Miss Saville, "with two married people present it is hardly polite to air such opinions."

"Oh," replied this incorrigible young man, looking mischievously at Alice, "if the cap does not fit them they need not put it on."

"Have some claret, Alice?" interrupted her husband, seeing that Geoffrey was in a teasing humour.

"No, thank you."

“Oh, but you will have to take it, my dear girl,” said her aunt; “you know you were ordered it.”

“Was she?” exclaimed Sir Reginald, pouring out a glass and gently pushing it towards her.

“Oh, but I really cannot drink it. I hate it!” she urged.

“Then have some on your handkerchief,” said Geoffrey soothingly; “like the man who became a teetotaller after indulging for years, and being asked to take some *real* ‘mountain dew,’ reluctantly declined, but said, ‘Give me a drop on my handkerchief, it will do me good to *smell* it.’”

“Hold out your handkerchief; it will be all the same as if you swallowed it.”

“Geoffrey, I declare I think you are quite off your head at times; is he not, Mary?—or is it his Irish proclivities

breaking out?" said Alice, waving away Geoffrey and the claret-jug.

"Don't *you* talk about Irish proclivities, ma'am; you have a strong suspicion of the blarney-stone yourself, and Irish eyes, and a real Irish temper."

"Geoffrey, how *can* you say so?"

"Very easily. I often see you blarneying and wheedling that child of yours as only an Irishwoman can. I suppose you don't say, 'Ah, won't you now, just to please mother?' and you coaxed and talked me out of that photo of——"

"Geoffrey, I declare, if you say another word, I'll never be friends with you again!" exclaimed Alice, half rising.

"Oh, all right, I'm dumb; but you *did*, you know; and I maintain that your Irishisms are as thick as the leaves in Vallambrosa. Why should the leaves be thicker *there* than anywhere else?" said

he, standing up and looking round. "Can anyone tell me? I thought not. Well, I'm off, not to study the leaves, but the *fruit* in the garden."

On Sunday evening, just as Alice was about to step into bed, and Mary was already sound asleep, the nurse came in to say, "Master Maurice is very bad with croup, and such a time to have it, too—not a drop of ipecacuanha in the house since Mary the housemaid broke the bottle last week." To hurry on her dressing-gown and run up to the nursery took Alice less than two minutes. Maurice lay gasping in his cot. He was very ill indeed, as the nurse had said. He had never had such a bad attack before. His plaintive eyes, his poor little hot clasping hands, his struggles for breath, drove Alice nearly wild.

The nurse said, "I can't leave the child, ma'am. Will you go down and rouse Sir Reginald or Master Geoffrey, and send off for the doctor at once?"

Alice flew down the passage, and had gone some distance before she suddenly remembered that she did not know which was her husband's room, and he must be called up in preference to Geoffrey. She knew it was in the old wing, and that no one but himself slept there. Opening the swing-door into the dark carpetless corridor, she tried the first room. Silence. She opened the door—all was dark and still; in the next equal blackness and stillness; at the third, her patience exhausted, she dispensed with a knock, turned the handle, and all but fell down the steps into a lighted room, large, low, and old-fashioned, bare of curtains and all luxuries. A small iron bed, some obsolete chairs and

tables, a huge bookcase, and a couple of cabinets containing birds'-nests and fossils, were ranged round the walls. Her husband was standing in the middle of the room with his coat off, winding up his watch. Shutting it with a sharp click, he viewed the apparition on the doorstep with unmeasured astonishment. His wife's white frightened face told him that something was amiss, as she stood before him pale and distracted.

"What is the matter?" he cried.
"Robbers! or is the house on fire?"

"Maurice is very ill. I want you to rouse up the men and send for the doctor."

"Very well," he replied, resuming his coat and taking up his candle. "I'll have a look at him first; perhaps he is not as bad as you imagine."

He followed Alice to the nursery; and

when he saw the state of the case he looked very grave indeed.

"Shall I go for the doctor myself, Alice?" he asked.

"No, sir, *do not*," interposed the nurse significantly. "You had much better stay here."

Whilst he was below giving directions, Alice and the nurse administered a steaming hot bath to Maurice; but it was of no avail, his breathing was as laboured as ever. The nurse going downstairs, on an errand, met her master returning.

"Well, is he better?" he asked eagerly.

"No, sir; but worse! How long will it be before the doctor comes?"

"An hour, at the least," replied Sir Reginald.

"An hour's the very most he will last, poor lamb."

“Is he so very bad as all *that*?” inquired her master, turning deadly pale.

“Very bad. He could not be worse! Will you please to stay with my lady whilst I am away—if anything do happen to the child, she’ll go clean out of her mind, for certain—it’s a terrible pity Mrs. Mayhew is away, and Miss Saville is no more use than a child herself.”

“Shall I have her called? Surely she has some experience.”

“No, sir; the fewer people in the nursery the better; and I’m afraid that all the experience in the country could not save the child *now*—he’s desperate bad.” So saying, this Job’s comforter continued her way downstairs, leaving Sir Reginald to take her place with his wife. He stood for a moment to collect his thoughts, and then quickly ascended to the nursery, where he found the child on Alice’s lap,

fighting and gasping for breath—a most heartrending sight. His mother, perfectly collected so far, but as white as marble, was soothing him with such soft endearments and caresses as only a mother knows.

When her husband entered, she raised her sweet pathetic eyes to his, as if in mute entreaty for help for her child.

“I wish I knew something to suggest, Alice,” he said, coming over to the table, near which she was sitting; “I am a capital nurse if it were typhoid fever or broken bones; but I know nothing about children. There is an old book on household medicine in the library, we might find some hints in it. Shall I fetch it?”

“Do, and don’t be long,” she answered.

In a few minutes he had returned with the book, over which they pored together—

the barrier between them was completely broken down for the time being by this common anxiety. Alice found herself ordering him hither and thither as if he were Geoffrey. None of the remedies suggested were of any use, as there was no medicine-chest in the house, and a mustard plaster and hot bath had been already tried in vain.

Reginald lifted the child from Alice's arms and laid him in his bed, saying that he would have more air.

Presently the nurse returned, and, standing at the foot of the cot, surveyed the little patient critically. Whilst Alice was bending over him, she approached her master and whispered in his ear:

"It is all over with him; another fit like the last and he will choke; he can't live above a quarter of an hour."

"In that case you had better leave

me alone with Lady Fairfax; but bring the doctor the instant he comes."

"But I'd better stay, sir; I had, indeed."

"No—no," he returned impatiently, "go—go at once. You can be of no use here."

This whispered conversation was unnoticed by Alice, who was bending over Maurice, fanning him. With watch in hand, Sir Reginald stood at one side of the child, whilst his wife knelt at the other. Maurice seemed weaker and weaker.

Alice looked at her husband and read in his face that he shared her worst fears. Her child was dying. She leant over her boy in an agony of tearless grief.

"Oh, my darling Maurice!" she cried almost frantically, "don't die, don't leave me! you are all I have in the world!" looking at him with distracted eyes and wringing her small thin hands. "If you

are taken I will go with you. I won't, no, I won't live without you ! ”

“ Alice, Alice ! ” remonstrated her husband ; “ think of what you are saying.”

Suddenly rising, she took the child up in her arms and carried him to the window.

“ At least he shall die in my arms,” she said. “ Yes, he shall ! ” she exclaimed excitedly.

“ But he is not dying now,” said Sir Reginald. “ Give him to me for a little ; he is much too heavy for you. Remember, whilst there's life there's hope.”

“ No—no—no ! Do not take him from me for the little time he may be left. Oh, my own darling, how you are suffering ! If I could only bear it for you ; if I might only die in your stead ! ” she moaned, rocking the boy in her arms. “ How glad I am that they say I am so

weak and delicate ; I will soon follow you, my treasure."

Sir Reginald, leaning against the window-shutter, listened to his half-distracted wife in silence.

"I know you think that I am wicked, that I am insane," continued Alice ; "but if he dies I will die too ; it will kill me." And she turned on him a look akin to madness and despair.

"Alice, am I nothing to you, then ?"

"You ! You are only the shadow of my husband. No ; you are nothing to me ; you said so yourself," she murmured as she kissed her boy's hands convulsively.

"I know that I am nothing to you but the shadow of a husband. Deeply as you have injured me, what else could I be ? But consider me now—for the next few hours at least—the husband I *would* have been to you, and let me

comfort you, my dearest. If your child is taken, who can share your grief like me—his father? and if he is spared—as I sincerely trust he will be—who can so deeply feel the happiness of having him restored? His pulse is still pretty strong,” he added, taking the child’s little hand in his. “The doctor will be here in five minutes. Do not give up all hope yet, my poor Alice.”

“Oh Reginald,” she said gratefully, “you have lifted a little of the load off my heart; you have comforted me already.”

At this instant the door opened, and the doctor and nurse came into the room; the former bustled over to the side of Maurice’s cot.

“Ah-h!” said he. He always prefaced his remarks with a long breath, as if he had just swallowed something delicious. “I’m in time, after all, I see! Bring

him here to the table, Lady Fairfax, and I'll give him a dose that will cure him in no time. Don't look so frightened, my dear young lady."

White as her dressing-gown, her long hair hanging in a thick loose plait far below her waist, she rose and gave her boy into the doctor's hands. He administered a remedy that had an almost instantaneous effect, and, within a quarter of an hour, Maurice lay in his little cot sound asleep.

The doctor, an elderly, eccentric, and extremely clever man, after staring at Sir Reginald for some seconds, said brusquely :

"And who is this young gentleman who has dropped the medicine so accurately and been so useful?"

"He is my husband, Dr. Barton."

"Ah-h ! I thought so, from the likeness to the boy ; but you told me your husband

was in India ! By what conjuring trick is he here to-night ? ”

“ No conjuring trick beyond a medical board,” replied Sir Reginald coolly.

“ Ah-h ! Well, as you *are* here, Sir Reginald, I want to speak to you. The child is all right, there is not the slightest fear of him—a bad attack of croup ; but I’ve pulled children through worse often. That idiot of a nurse, to swell her own importance, seems to have frightened Lady Fairfax nearly into fits. I never thought much of that nurse—never ; I often told you so,” nodding solemnly at Alice. “ Well, we may as well go downstairs, Sir Reginald. Good-night, Lady Fairfax ; good-night, and go to bed.”

Together they descended to the library. The doctor, having usurped the rug and refreshed himself with some spirits and water, said abruptly :

“I want particularly to speak to you, Sir Reginald, now you *are* here, about your wife. The boy is all right, he will live to plague you for many a year ; he is as strong as a pony ; there’s no fear of *him*.”

“Do you mean,” said Sir Reginald, fixing on him an eye piercing as an eagle’s, “that there *is* fear of my wife ?”

“I do,” he replied emphatically, “and I think it my duty to tell you so, now you *are* here. That you set off to India and left a delicate girl of seventeen moping here alone is your concern, of course !”

“Of course,” repeated his host, reddening with anger.

Dr. Barton eyed the young man standing before him with a resentful glance from under his bushy, luxuriant, gray eyebrows.

“He looks overbearing, harsh, and cold. I’ve no doubt he treats her as he treats

his troopers ; I'll not spare him then. Your wife," clearing his throat and speaking slowly, "will probably leave you a widower ere long. She comes of a delicate stock, and, as far as I can observe, is rapidly following in her mother's footsteps."

Seeing that this thrust told, he continued :

"She is subject to deadly fainting fits, and might go off in one of them any day."

A dead silence followed this remark, during which the doctor, after glaring at Sir Reginald over the edge of his tumbler, swallowed the remainder of his whisky and water, and, buttoning up his coat and taking his hat, briskly prepared to depart.

Sir Reginald's dry lips refused to speak ; large drops of perspiration stood like beads on his brow ; the veins in his hand, where he was grasping the back of a chair, resembled thick cords.

"Ah," thought the doctor, complacently,

"he does care. However, he had no business to leave her," he said to himself, as he feasted his eye on his victim with an air of tranquil enjoyment.

"She may," he proceeded aloud, "come round with care and indulgence of every kind ; she must never be crossed, thwarted, or agitated, and always have her own way. (Looks as if he liked his own way.) I'll come round in a day or two and see how she is going on. Good-bye."

"Wait a second," said Sir Reginald vehemently, detaining him with one hand ; "you cannot go like this. If my wife is so seriously ill, you must leave me some more fixed directions."

"She is not actually ill, only threatened with illness. As for directions, I say watch her and guard her as the very apple of your eye. She nearly died when that child was born, as I daresay you know. A sudden

chill, a bad cold, would carry her off; she has no stamina." Exit.

"What a night this has been," thought Sir Reginald, looking at the clock wearily; "first I am told that the child is dying, now my wife."

He drew a chair to the table, and, leaning his elbows on it, buried his face in his hands.

"Anything but *this*," he said to himself; "after all I have gone through can *this* be coming?"

For more than a quarter of an hour he remained in the same attitude, wrestling with the bitterest anguish he had ever known. The door, which was ajar, was softly pushed open and Alice came in.

"Well," she said, "what does he say; is it all right?"

Then catching sight of her husband's face, she seized his arm.

“Tell me the worst at once,” she gasped, steadying herself by her other hand on the back of his chair. “Don’t hide it from me, for God’s sake !”

“There is nothing to be told,” he replied, making a valiant effort to speak and look as usual. “Maurice was not nearly as ill as we imagined ; he will be all right to-morrow ; I assure you there is no cause for alarm,” he added earnestly, “none whatever.”

“You are sure ? You are not saying this out of mistaken kindness ? It is true ?”

“Quite true,” he repeated, pushing back his chair and standing up.

Alice gazed fixedly at her husband ; he was deathly pale, and had a half-stunned look, and surely when she first saw him his thick black lashes were *wet*.

“Then what was the matter with you just now ?” she inquired. “Won’t you tell

me ? Won't you let me share your trouble after all you said to-night ? ”

“ I can't. At least not now,” he stammered.

“ Why not now ? ” she exclaimed. “ It must be some very bad news, I know, for you look even more sorry than when we thought Maurice was dying ; and yet it *cannot* be anything worse than that ! Let me help you to bear it whatever it is ; do, my dear Regy ? ”

“ Never allude to the subject again, Alice, unless you wish to drive me frantic. You could not share this trouble with me, no one could. Perhaps some day I may tell you, not now. You must go to bed at once, it is past two o'clock,” he added authoritatively.

“ No, no,” she replied firmly ; “ I am going to sit up with Maurice.”

“ Indeed you will do nothing of the kind ; I will stay with him if it is necessary ; but

you are to go to bed this instant," he replied in a tone that effectually repelled argument. And in spite of all Alice could say she was obliged to obey, and, very reluctantly, retired.

CHAPTER V.

A TRAVELLER'S TALES.

MAURICE, with a broad piece of flannel round his throat, appeared at breakfast next morning as well as ever; and Alice, pale and languid, took her place before the teapot as usual. She observed a change in her husband. On other mornings he disappeared after breakfast, and was never seen till luncheon, excusing himself on the plea of business with the bailiff; and, in fact, unless absolutely obliged to ride or play lawn-tennis, they saw nothing of him all day.

Alice had reason to know that many of his spare hours were spent with Maurice. More than once she had come across the pair in the park, Maurice riding Tweedle Dum, his father holding the bridle and relating long and thrilling fairy tales—accounts of dwarfs, giants, and fairy-princesses with golden hair; or they would be discovered on the edge of a pond, sailing boats, or under the lee of a haystack, sharing a leaf of strawberries. Maurice idolised his father, and Alice could see that she no longer had the first and only place in his affections. She felt no twinge of jealousy as she made this discovery; she was very ready to share his heart with Reginald.

This particular morning her husband did not vanish as usual the instant breakfast was over. He loitered about the grounds with the ladies, made suggestions

about the garden, and gave them a lesson in budding roses.

He distinctly put a veto on lawn-tennis as far as Alice was concerned, but he fetched a chair, a book, and a shawl, and established her under a tree, where she could look on. She caught his eyes fixed on her more than once with a look of anxiety and concern in their dark depths that puzzled her extremely.

What did this change mean? Could he be going to forgive her after all? Her colour and her spirits rose at the thought; a little happiness goes a long way at twenty. Revived by a whole morning's rest, she was meditating a move, when Geoffrey, with a broad smirk on his face and a fat frog in his handkerchief, lounged up to her.

"Here," said he, "is the frog who would a-wooing go;" and he added, as he un-

covered the treasure, "he is come to pay his addresses to you, Alice," making a feint of putting him in her lap.

"That he is not," she cried, jumping up and dodging Geoffrey round a tree. Round and round they went like a pair of squirrels, Mary and Reginald gravely looking on.

"Did you ever see such a pair of children?" exclaimed Mary. "That's the way Alice used to go on before she was married. She had such wild spirits; she was the life of us all at Rougemont. I would never have known her to be the same person, she is so changed," she observed, with a reproachful glance at Reginald.

"I see you blame me for it all, Miss Ferrars; but Alice has only herself to thank, no one else. You would say that I was changed too if you had known me three years ago, before this unfortunate

separation between us. Alice has told you all about it, of course?" he asked with conviction.

"No, not one word."

"Do you mean to say that, living together in such close intimacy—sharing the same room, and no doubt sitting up half the night talking, as young ladies do—she has never made you her confidante?"

"Not with regard to you. On any other subject she is as open as the day, but her married life she never alludes to; and well as I know her and love her—childish and young as she is—she is the last person into whose confidence I would thrust myself uninvited."

Just at this instant Alice, who had hitherto eluded Geoffrey, came running up exhausted and out of breath with laughing.

"Save me, Mary, save me!" she cried, stretching out both hands, and at the same

time catching her foot in the tennis-rope she would have measured her length on the sward, had not her husband stepped forward and caught her in his arms. It was altogether accidental, and only for a second that he held her, but Alice became crimson.

“I cannot allow any more of this kind of thing,” he said, coolly picking up his tennis-bat. “Helen will be back this afternoon, and I am sure she will not hear of your going to the ball to-morrow if you knock yourself up to-day. I am going into Manister now, and I leave you in Miss Ferrars’ charge. I see Cardigan waiting, and as I have to change my clothes I must be off.”

“By-the-way, Rex, before you go I want you to tell me something,” said Geoffrey with an air of unusual solemnity.

“Yes?” responded Reginald, turning back and looking at him gravely. “Look sharp, then, for I’m in a hurry.”

"You have been brought up amongst horses since you were the size of Maurice, and ought to know all about them, both from a civil and military point of view——"

"Well, what is it?" impatiently.

"On which side of a horse does the most hair grow?"

"The side the mane is on."

"No; try again."

"The off side!—the near side!"

"No. Give it up?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"The outside! Good riddle, isn't it?"

"No. Your own, I presume. I have no time to waste listening to such nonsense. Now mind you don't encourage Alice in running about and tiring herself," he concluded, as with a glance at his wife he walked rapidly away.

"What does he mean?" asked Geoffrey with raised brows and an air of veiled

derision ; “one would think you were made of sugar ! I suppose he is going into Manister to buy a glass case to keep you in ! You don’t mean to tell me you are about to set up as a young lady who faints and goes into hysterics, or a delicate creature with nerves ? If you are, I’ve done with you !”

“Do not be alarmed ; I think I shall reassure you at luncheon. I have the appetite of a ploughman, and I am yearning for the gong,” replied Alice as, shouldering her parasol, she turned towards the house, followed by her two friends.

Helen arrived the same afternoon and related her adventures and news at five-o’clock tea. She also delivered a short but severe lecture to Alice for having taken a long ride, and looking pale, heavy-eyed, and tired. In spite of Alice’s indignant denial she could not conceal from herself that she *was* very tired as she

entered the drawing-room just before dinner and wearily seated herself in one of the windows. The only other occupant of the room was her husband, ensconced in an easy-chair and almost concealed by a large newspaper. She recognised him, however, by the slim brown hand that firmly grasped *The Standard*. He did not take any notice of her entrance. "He never did," she thought with a sharp pang as she leant her head listlessly against the window-sash and looked out. Suddenly the grass appeared to heave, earth and sky seemed confusedly mixed. She turned her head, the room was swimming round and round ; she was going to faint. She rose to escape to her own room whilst there was yet time, but it was too late ; she tottered, grasped blindly at a chair ; somebody, tall and strong, took her in his arms, and she remembered no more. Reginald had been

surreptitiously glancing at Alice for some minutes. Her dejected attitude, the weary pathetic pose of her haughty little head, struck him painfully. How white, how awfully white she was ; was she going to faint ? She was ; he saw her rise unsteadily and try to speak. In an instant he was beside her, and saved her from a fall for the second time that day. Very, very tenderly he carried her over and laid her on a couch. How light and fragile was his burden—she seemed like a child in his arms ! She looked deathlike as he laid her down. He had never seen a woman faint before, and was at his wits' end to know what to do. To leave her was impossible ; he dare not. He rang the bell madly and returned to his post. As he thought of the doctor's words the previous evening his heart stood still with horror. She looked so cold, so marblelike, so utterly

inanimate—could she be dead? He took up one of her small limp hands and felt her pulse. As he was doing so, Helen and Mary, to his great relief, came into the room.

“Ah, I’m not one bit surprised,” said the former composedly. “Run for my salts, Mary. Fetch a glass of water and a fan, Regy. She will come round presently.”

Her quiet matter-of-fact manner relieved him at once. Mary’s mind was set at rest now and for ever on one subject—Sir Reginald did care for Alice after all: loved her as a man like him could love.

One glance at him had been sufficient. Even now, though reassured by Helen, his face was ashy white, and the hand that held the tumbler of water shook visibly. By this time they were joined by Mark and Geoffrey. Alice had revived; she sat up, looking very pale and dazed,

and announced "that she was all right and going in to dinner, and really did not know how she could have been so stupid."

She was quickly suppressed by Helen, who said :

"No, my dear, no dinner for you ; you are going to bed, and Regy will carry you upstairs."

"Indeed he shall not!" cried Alice, a faint tinge of pink coming into her cheeks, and starting up as though to leave the sofa. "No, no," she added, glancing nervously at her husband ; his grave, anxious face touched her and surprised her.

"Will you let Mark carry you ?" said Helen soothingly. "He has had plenty of practice with me, and he won't drop you."

"No, ten thousand times ; why should

anyone carry me? I've not lost the use of my limbs; I am quite capable of walking upstairs. I shall stay here for the present, whilst you all go to dinner. Pray go! Please go! Don't mind me. Helen will tell you," addressing her husband, "that it is nothing—nothing at all. Why, at one time I used to faint regularly every day—I got quite into the habit of it," with a reassuring smile. "There is the gong. You really make me very uncomfortable all of you, staring at me like this. Go," she added, waving them away, "go to dinner."

Thus eagerly adjured they trooped off, with the exception of Helen. Mary observed that one person barely touched a morsel of food, and that was Reginald. He was silent and preoccupied, and answered at random when addressed.

Towards the middle of the meal Helen

came sailing into the room, prepared to make up for lost time as she briskly unfolded her napkin.

“You may make your mind quite easy, Regy,” she said. “Alice will be all right to-morrow. She was only worn out, poor child, and has gone to bed, and is, I dare-say, already asleep. How frightened you did look! What would have become of you if you had seen her when she was really ill, and her life hung by a thread from hour to hour?” she added between two spoonsful of soup.

“How do you know I was frightened?”

“Your face spoke volumes, my dear boy; you were as white as this tablecloth.”

“Is that how you look when you go into action, Regy?” asked Geoffrey, looking up from his plate.

“Scarcely, I hope, or I would be a sorry example to the men.”

"Tell me, Rex, did you ever know what it was to be in a regular blue funk?"

"I can't honestly say I ever was on my own account—probably it's a treat in store for me—but I have felt fears for others that have made my heart stand still more than once. The sensation must be the same as abject personal fear—in other words, a blue funk."

"Well, I don't understand; explain yourself?"

"For instance, when I saw a gun and four horses suddenly back over the edge of a pass, and ultimately go over—in spite of the horses' frantic exertions—a fall of two thousand feet, I trembled for the gunners."

"So I should imagine."

"Fortunately they flung themselves off in time."

“Poor horses! what a horrible sight!” said Mary Ferrars. “I daresay you have seen a good many such.”

“Yes, I’m sorry to say I have. For instance, I have seen a horse’s head taken clean off with a shell.”

“Don’t, Reginald!” exclaimed Helen; “you are making me perfectly sick.”

“Well then, I won’t; I’ll spare you the rest of my experiences. You want to know, Geoff, what I mean by ‘fearing for others’? Now, for instance, if old Fordyce gets the regiment, I tremble for *you*. He has seen the superb caricature you drew of him, nearly all nose; and he strongly suspects that you are the ‘party’ that painted old Blowhard, his favourite white charger, a dazzling shepherd’s-plaid. I shudder when I think of *your* fate, my young friend.”

“Stuff, rubbish, nonsense!” exclaimed Geoffrey contemptuously. “Do you know

what *I* heard the other day? but I need hardly say that I did not believe it: that you, Reginald Fairfax,—‘Fighting Fairfax,’ as they call you—keep the young fry of the Seventeenth in glorious order. ‘Set a thief to catch a thief,’ I said. The benighted youths look upon you as a happy blending of Bayard and Sir Galahad. I assured my informant that ‘Still waters run deep’ was a proverb made expressly to fit you, and that they little knew you.”

“Much obliged,” replied Reginald, stroking his moustache to conceal a smile. “We have a very nice set of boys in the Seventeenth, and you might do worse than exchange. I’ll see that they don’t bully you, and do what I can to smarten you up.”

“Thanks for your noble offer, but the Fifth could not afford to lose me. As to smartening me up, it would be impossible;

it would be painting the lily. Don't you think so, Miss Ferrars? Don't you think I'm a very smart-looking young fellow? just as efficient, if not actually as bloodthirsty, as our host, who revelled in the name of 'Shaitan' whilst in Afghanistan. It was a pretty little nickname given him by the tribes. You can guess what it means," nodding across the table mysteriously.

"Enough of these mutual compliments," exclaimed Helen. "It was not Reginald himself, but his *horse* that was called 'Shaitan,' my good Geoffrey, and the Afghans had something else to do than find nicknames for British officers."

"By-the-way, Rex," remarked Geoffrey, leaning back in his chair, adjusting his eyeglass, and evidently stretching his long legs still farther under the mahogany, with the air of a man who has dined to his satisfaction, "what's your opinion of the

native of that part of the world, candidly and impartially?"

"If you mean the Afridi of the period, my candid, impartial opinion of him is that he is a dirty-looking ruffian, who would rob his own mother, and cut his father's throat for the sake of two rupees."

"Inhuman monster!" ejaculated Helen, tragically.

"One old fellow told me *himself* that there was nothing in life so pleasant as sitting on the roof of one's house, and shooting at the wayfarers who came to drink at the well. He dwelt on the subject with such pleasure, that I have no doubt that he looked back on it as one of his happiest experiences."

"Old brute!" muttered Geoffrey. "*How* I should have enjoyed a pot-shot at *him*! What sort of shots were they, take them all in all?"

"Not bad, considering their weapons and

ammunition ; a long Jazail studded with brass, and rams' horns full of very doubtful powder. They are no use at a snap shot, or in the open ; but give them *lots* of time to aim, and good cover behind a bit of rock, and they generally pick off a fair share of stragglers. The first night we camped beyond Ali Musjid we chose a bad place, a hollow, and the light attracted swarms all round us. The bullets went everywhere, and the firing resembled nothing on earth so much as a hot corner at a big battue."

"Awfully pleasant for all you fellows !" ejaculated Geoffrey.

"We had only two casualties, strange to say, though some of the tents were riddled. I need scarcely remark that we were more careful about the site of our next camp."

"No doubt you made yourselves very secure and luxurious when you were per-

manently fixed at Dabaule?" inquired Helen.

"Comparatively speaking I suppose we were more secure, although Vaughan caught an Afridi in his tent one night. He heard a noise, and putting out his hand to get hold of a revolver, he caught the bare, shaven head of one of these beggars. He gave the alarm, and some of us rushed in and found him struggling with a powerful fellow, with the fiend's own expression and a knife between his teeth. We made an example of him next day as a warning to others. But it was of precious little use; they slaughtered our unfortunate grass-cutters and syces in the most barbarous way, and sent us in our regimental barber with both hands cut off. He did not seem to mind *that* so much as eighty rupees they had robbed him of, and he was utterly heart-broken about them—his savings, his little

all. So I promised to make up the money if he got well ; and, strange to say, he made a most wonderfully rapid recovery, and seems to get on capitally with his two bare stumps."

"Poor creature !" exclaimed Helen.

"How horrible !" cried Miss Ferrars.

"I suppose it was all open country ?" remarked Geoffrey ; "no roads, and like a bleak sort of common, I always fancy it ; with a few hills and lots of stones and rocks."

"That was the case in some places, but in others we had, after awhile, a capital road, especially by the Kyber line, thanks to the sappers ; and some wag in one place put up a finger-post with 'Madras to Cabul' painted on it in large letters ; and the road itself was as good as you need wish to see ; but in many parts we had no road at all,

and it was terrible work for the artillery, especially when the country was cut up with lots of watercourses."

"By-the-bye, Rex," said Helen, helping herself to her second peach, "how were you off for food?"

"Very badly, indeed, sometimes; and I assure you that I now know what *hunger* means, from downright practical experience."

"Why, you had your rations and your mess," cried Geoffrey.

"A pound of meat a day for a hungry man who spends, perhaps, twelve hours in the saddle, with a bitter bleak wind to sharpen his appetite, was not much to boast of; and sometimes the ration was bad, or bone. When we had our permanent camp we fared well enough, and had a stew—a big pot into which everything was thrown: game, rations, goat, etc.; and as

the pot was always kept going, it had a rich miscellaneous flavour, difficult to describe, but most excellent."

"Do you mean that it was not made afresh every day?" asked Miss Ferrars, a fair amateur cook.

"Every day something fresh was added, but the original stew was about three months old. Never cleared out, that was the beauty of it."

"O-oh!" cried Helen, "how could you! how can you?"

"It was most superior, I assure you; our *pot-au-feu* was noted, I can tell you, Helen."

"That will do. No more traveller's tales for *me*, Rex"—rising—"I'm going to see if Alice is asleep."

As the door closed on the disgusted matron, Reginald said:

"Helen may turn up her nose at our stew,

but if she had been one week in camp, she would have appreciated it just as keenly as the most ravenous among us."

"Had you a mess-tent?" asked Geoffrey solicitously.

"Yes, a kind of one, when we were fixtures; nothing very luxurious, I need scarcely say, and little or no mess kit. It was a sight, once seen never forgotten, to witness our fellows going to dinner; various figures in greatcoats and comforters solemnly approaching, and each bearing in his hand his own drinking-cup, and plate, and knife and fork. We lived in Spartan simplicity, I can assure you."

"And how did you like it?" inquired Miss Ferrars.

"To be frank with you, not much," returned her host candidly. "The cold was simply awful—bad enough for us who come from a coldish climate, but for our

poor camp-followers and syces, natives of the broiling plains, it was, in many cases, death. I could not say how many camel-drivers and grass-cutters have been found frozen in their sleep."

"But they had warm clothes," said Mrs. Mayhew, with the air of asserting an unanswerable fact.

"Yes; such as they were. A kind of blanket suit made to fit the million. And then you saw tall men in clothes barely below their miserable knees, and little men shambling along, one huge wrinkle. These garments were better than nothing, that's all."

"And did you feel the cold yourself?" asked Mark, with sympathetic interest.

"Sometimes; but I am a hardy fellow, and could stand it better than lots of others. Duck-shooting of a winter's day, at home, broke me in pretty well, you know."

"And was your appetite equally well

broken in?" asked Geoffrey, with raised eyebrows.

"I'm afraid not," returned Reginald, with a laugh. "Many a time I have gone to bed hungry."

"But you could always buy?" said Geoffrey, combatively.

"Not always. When the surrounding country was nothing but stones and brown grass, and there was no bazaar, no mess, nothing but our strictly allotted ration, I declare I've sometimes envied my chargers, who were pretty well off for hay. But of course these short commons were the exception, not the rule," he added cheerfully.

Mary gazed with blank, open-eyed amazement at her neighbour, and tried to realise that this nonchalant, handsome host of hers, who seemed to consider it rather an exertion to break a few walnuts, who was

surrounded by every luxury taste could devise or money could obtain, had been quite recently a cold, hungry soldier, garbed in a sheepskin coat ; had confronted hardship and war, and had ridden up undaunted and looked into the very face of death itself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BALL AT RUFFORD.

THE evening of the ball found Alice arraying herself at her cheval glass, an admiring abigail was twitching and pulling at her dress—she also admired herself in no small degree. The glass reflected an exquisitely-fitting white silk ball costume, trimmed with clouds of soft lace, tulle, and silver—it was not merely a dress, it was an inspiration. A thick collar of diamonds encircled her throat—Reginald's wedding present; three diamond stars to correspond sparkled in her hair; silver and

diamond bangles, long white gloves, and a feather fan completed her toilet.

Mary, in pale pink (her particular colour), looked remarkably well; but Alice *killed* her; no one would look at her twice beside such a dazzling vision of loveliness.

Together they descended to the hall, and found Mr. and Mrs. Mayhew, Geoffrey, and Reginald awaiting them, the two latter in the full splendour of their hussar uniform. Maurice, who had been allowed to sit up for once, seemed duly to appreciate the great occasion, and viewed his father with profound and unmistakable admiration; even the radiant apparition in white that came floating down the staircase was powerless to divert his attention.

After an eight-mile drive the Monkswood party found themselves at the scene of action, and amidst a throng of carriages

and blaze of lights descended at the entrance.

“We shall have to sort ourselves now,” remarked Geoffrey, as he sprang out with the bound of a kangaroo. “You and Alice, Regy—Miss Ferrars and I will follow—lead the way.”

On a table in the entrance-hall lay heaps of gilded programmes. Sir Reginald picked up two as he passed, and, handing one to his wife, said carelessly :

“You will give me a dance, Alice ; won’t you ?”

“Certainly,” she replied, secretly much surprised at the request. “I have promised Geoffrey the second valse ; what will you have ?”

“The valse after supper, when the room is not so crowded. There seem to be hundreds here,” glancing through the ball-room. “Let me see,” taking her

programme and looking at it for an instant ; “ Number fourteen, ‘ Brises des Nuits,’ I’ll take that, thanks,” scribbling his initials and handing back her card. “ We had better move on now, the door is no longer blocked.”

They at last succeeded in making their way to Lady Rufford, who received them with much *empressement* ; and Alice, after exchanging a few words with her hostess, was eagerly engaged for the ensuing lancers by a little Russian prince, who had clamorously begged for an introduction.

It is almost needless to describe a large ball in a country house ; there is a strong family likeness among them, one is very much like another. A good floor, good supper, Liddell’s band, and flowers in all directions constitute the chief features. The house party, the *élite* of the county, formed some portion of those present.

There were pretty country girls with rather *outré* dresses; there were stylish young ladies, who went to town every season, and wore unimpeachable frocks, to these a ball was a very ordinary affair; there were young men, bored and *blasé*, lounging against doors and walls, and looking superior to the whole thing; rustic sons of neighbouring squires, uncouth and unpolished, enjoying themselves hugely in elephantine gambols with the partners of their choice. There were the chaperones—already languishing for supper, a large military contingent, and an immense number of outsiders, to whom this ball was the great social event of the year. The rooms were crowded; the reception-room, tea-room, and ball-room were almost impassible, not to speak of the staircase and all the nooks and corners that were crammed.

Alice and Reginald were personally but little known, and they overheard various remarks about themselves of a highly laudatory character. For instance, during a pause in a valse Reginald's lively partner, who was freely discussing the dancers, exclaimed :

“Do look at that girl in white, just opposite. There, standing next the pillar. How she and that boy are enjoying themselves ! They seem too intimate for you to call it a flirtation, and not sufficiently tender for an engaged couple. Who can they be ? I have never seen them before.”

Seeing her partner smile, she added :

“Ah, I believe you know them ! ”

“I do,” he calmly replied. “The boy, who would be extremely indignant if he heard you call him one, is Mr. Saville, of the Fifth Hussars ; and the young lady with him is his cousin, and my wife.”

"Your wife! you don't say so? You are joking! Is that really Lady Fairfax? She looks so preposterously young, I could easily imagine this to be her first ball."

"Nevertheless, she has been married for more than three years."

"She is uncommonly pretty," returned the young lady, gazing at her with all her eyes. "Several people have asked me who she was, but I did not know. She is quite the belle of the evening. Don't you think so?"

"I always agree with a lady, especially when it is a question of taste," was his evasive answer. "Shall we take another turn?"

"Not very *enthusiastic* about his wife," was his partner's mental observation as they once more joined the dancers.

"Who is the lovely girl in white?" was a question that half the room were asking

each other. Alice is at last obtaining a *social success*, dozens of partners vainly beg for dances. She is turning the heads of all the young men, and filling the breasts of her own sex with the devouring flame of envy.

Supper was served at round tables accommodating ten or twelve. Sir Reginald and his partner had taken their places at one at which he was a stranger to all the other guests. A fat red-faced man, who was voraciously gobbling down lobster-salad, remarked to his neighbours :

“Capital ball ! capital supper !”

“Yes,” replied a bored-looking youth, with a patronising drawl, “good floor, lots of pretty girls.”

“Ah !” added a third, helping himself to ham, “but there is no one that comes within the length of a street of that girl in white, Lady Fairfax.”

"Quite agree with you," responded the bored one, in a tone of deep approval.

"Could not get a dance, though," said another; "card crammed."

"But," pleaded his partner, a young person with a figure and dress resembling a pink-and-white pin-cushion, "although she is quite too lovely, she has a melancholy expression when her face is in repose. I admire a more *riant* style. I think Miss Gordon is more taking, though not so strictly pretty."

"I think so too," said another lady; "Miss Gordon is *my* beauty."

"You are welcome to her, ladies," responded the red-faced squire; "none of the gentlemen will dispute her with you—we are all sworn admirers of Lady Fairfax. She's like a princess—a fairy princess. Let's drink her health," seizing a magnum of champagne and suiting the action to

the word, having already supped "not wisely, but too well."

Reginald, much disgusted, was tied to this particular table by his partner's wants—the demands of a locust-like appetite.

"Never so tiresome or so hungry a girl," he thought, as he replenished her plate time after time.

"What fun it is to hear them discussing your wife," she whispered; "you should get up and return thanks. How taken aback they would look."

"I don't think I will disturb their equanimity so cruelly," he returned. "But if you have *quite* finished, we will adjourn. The next dance has commenced, and your partner is sure to be anathematising me."

As he rose and left the table, someone said:

"Who is the young hussar fellow with the V.C. and the scowl?"

“Walking down the room with the girl in green?” answered a quiet-looking man, who had taken the vacant place, and was critically scanning the *menu*.

“Yes, the same.”

“Oh, that’s Fairfax.” (Sensation at the supper-table.)

Sir Reginald having recovered his liberty, was on his way to seek for a fresh partner, when he came face to face with one of the Twenty-Ninth who had been his host at Cheetapore. After a few brief expressions of pleasure and astonishment, the dragoon asked the hussar where he was staying, etc.

“I hope I shall have the pleasure of being presented to your wife. She is here, is she not?”

“Yes, but she is dancing at present.”

“Point her out, please; I am most anxious to see her.”

“Coming this way, in the white dress, dancing with the Highlander.”

“Jove!” ejaculated the dragoon, when she had passed. An enormous amount of admiration was compressed into that one syllable.

“You are a lucky fellow,” he added, surveying his companion enviously. “If I could get a wife like that, I’d marry to-morrow. Has she a sister?”

“No.”

“Has she a cousin with a family likeness?”

“Don’t be a fool, Carew,” replied Sir Reginald impatiently.

“I’m perfectly serious. There, she is sitting down now,” seizing his friend by the arm; “come along and introduce me.”

But ere they reached the ottoman another partner had claimed Alice and carried her away.

“Never mind,” said Sir Reginald consolingly, “come over to-morrow and dine and sleep. That will be a much better opportunity for making my wife’s acquaintance.”

Meantime Alice had been enjoying herself excessively. She was very fond of dancing; the floor and the music were all that could be desired, and she had had a succession of good partners. Her spirits, as Geoffrey remarked to her, were quite up to concert-pitch, and she was spending a very pleasant evening.

“So was Reginald,” she thought, as she observed him dancing every dance, and selecting with much discrimination the prettiest girls in the room! At length her waltz, number fourteen, came round. She had been in to supper with a young lord, who, anxious to retain the belle of the evening on his arm as long as possible,

was parading slowly up and down, entreating her for "one more dance."

"But I really cannot give you one; I have already put down four extra dances that are not on the card."

"Let me look at your programme, if you don't mind," he asked with cool superiority.

She handed it to him unhesitatingly.

Yes, every dance was full!

"Who is this fellow, R. M. F., who has got himself down for the next? Can't you throw him over—forget all about it—and give it to a very deserving young man instead?"

"How do you know that the other is not a very deserving young man also?" she asked with a smile.

"Who is he? He did not even give you his valuable autograph! Maybe he is not very keen about dancing—ten to one he is at supper! Who is he?" he repeated pertinaciously.

“He is my husband, since you insist on knowing.”

“Your husband——” with an impatient gesture, “oh, come then, that’s all right. The laws of society don’t permit married people to dance together. I never heard of such a thing. You’ll give *me* the dance, won’t you?” he added with tranquil confidence.

“No, certainly not!” she replied quietly.

“But if he forgets all about it, as he is sure to do—what then?”

“Your inference is not very flattering. But in that ‘case unprecedented’ you may have the dance with pleasure,” rejoined Alice with a smile.

“You are not a *bride*, are you?” he asked anxiously, after a moment’s silence.

“Oh no; I’ve been married more than three years,” she returned with some dignity.

“And may I ask if you always dance with your husband at balls?”

“Never, as yet, since we have been married,” she replied, looking down and surveying the toe of her slender satin shoe, with critical inspection.

“Well, mind you don’t throw me over. Let us sit down here at the end of the room till the band strikes up.”

Presently the strains of “*Brises des Nuits*” was heard, recalling wandering dancers.

“Look, Lady Fairfax! here’s a good-looking young hussar coming over here. I know he is going to ask you to dance. Remember your promise.”

“Where is he?” she asked indifferently.

“There, in the middle of the room. He has stopped to speak to that little artilleryman with the sandy moustache. Don’t you see him? A handsome, determined-looking fellow. I saw a fixed purpose in his

eye just now, but you won't *hear* of it, will you? Here he comes."

"But he is my husband!" exclaimed Alice triumphantly. "You see he did not forget the dance after all."

"That Fairfax? Why, I thought he was quite elderly, and he does not look more than six or seven and twenty. I see he is a V.C., and I have been wondering who he was all the evening. Will you introduce me?"

"I believe this is our dance, Alice?" said Sir Reginald, stiffly.

"Yes, I think so," she replied, rising with assumed indifference.

Having presented her late partner, she took her husband's arm and joined the dancers; one step—two steps—and they floated off.

"How well that couple waltz," was remarked by more than one. "They are the best dancers in the room," observed

a man who considered himself a good judge and a still better performer.

Their step suited exactly, and they glided easily in and out among the bumping, revolving crowd, with a combination of ease and grace that justified his remark. Reginald's London seasons stood him in good stead; and when Alice felt his arm firmly encircling her waist, and they plunged into the giddy vortex, she was perfectly confident that, so good was his steering, so quick his eye, and so perfect his step, that no matter what frantic or ponderous couples were afloat, *she* would meet with no collisions. She could not restrain a pardonable feeling of pride as she saw glance after glance levelled at herself and her husband with unmistakable approval. It was some time before Steepshire society realised the stupendous fact that "Fairfax was dancing with his

wife." It was: "Who is the pretty girl dancing with Fairfax?" or, "Who is the hussar Lady Fairfax has got hold of?" But when they had taken the idea well into their minds they were dumbfounded. "Where was the *divorcée*? Where was the enraged husband? Above all, where was the *idiot* who had promoted such a scandal? The Fairfaxes were on the very best of terms. They were the handsomest couple in the room; they were *devoted* to each other." Such were the whispers that floated round; and Alice was rehabilitated as quickly as her friends could desire, and placed, by public opinion, on the very top rung of the social ladder.

Alice knew perfectly that her husband had danced with her with an object in view. She felt that it was a most decided "duty dance." Not for an instant did his arm linger round her waist; not for a

second did his hand press hers. If she had been the merest stranger he could not have treated her with more distant ceremony. She paused to take breath for a few seconds, and they came to a standstill just opposite a large mirror, which faced them right across the room. She looked over, and saw a tall slight girl in white, fanning herself with a large feather fan; and it also reflected a very good-looking hussar, clad in all the pomp and panoply of his profession. His dark-blue gold-laced uniform became him well. He was leaning against the wall, watching the crowd with an air of supreme indifference and a decidedly bored expression of countenance. "Who would think we were husband and wife?" thought Alice, as she glanced once more at that couple across the room—"who, indeed? I will make one more effort to-night if I have an opportunity.

It will be my last attempt at making friends. If I fail now I fail for ever."

When the dance had concluded, Sir Reginald led his partner through the series of long rooms, in the wake of a multitude of others; not a few drifted aside into various sequestered bowers of flirtation, but the mass of dancers kept on moving down the great corridor; their goal appeared to be the garden, and many couples were soon scattered over its grassy sward. Our hero and heroine found their way into the conservatory. It was a charming place; a dim religious light, distributed by Chinese lanterns, sufficed to show gigantic tropical plants, palms, pyramids of flowers, and various cunningly-placed crimson seats for *two*. Having found a vacancy in a retired nook, Sir Reginald threw himself into one corner of the sofa when Alice had seated herself at the other; a silence, broken

only by the murmur of half-a-dozen adjacent flirtations and the splash of a fountain, lasted for at least five minutes.

“What possessed me to come here?” thought Reginald to himself. “Absence of mind? I forgot for the moment it was not old times. This is just the sort of place we used to affect before we were married.” He looked at his wife—contemplated her with a grave critical scrutiny almost severe. She was leaning back in her corner, playing with her fan. The red background of the couch threw her slender graceful figure into bold relief. She was very lovely, certainly; and now he came to think of it, there *was* a melancholy look on her face when in repose.

“Reginald,” she said, sitting up and facing him, “do you remember the last time we danced together?”

"No! I think not!" he answered dubiously.

(I think you *do*, Sir Reginald.)

"It was at the Lancasters; we danced together half the evening."

"Did we? Then we must have made ourselves rather remarkable," he replied, with a short laugh, breaking off a large bit of fern and critically examining its fronds.

"Do you remember the ball at Burford House?"

Considering that it was at that very ball he had proposed to her, he could not well plead forgetfulness.

"I do, of course," he answered, glancing at her quickly, and pausing in the act of dissecting the fern bit by bit. "What is the good of calling up these reminiscences? There are some things which are best forgotten," he added with cool judicial serenity.

“Do you wish to forget *that* evening, Reginald?” she asked in a tone of low reproach, and raising her fan to hide her trembling lips.

“Well, no,” he replied slowly and with evident reluctance. “Not yet; but I quite agree with Balzac that ‘Life would be intolerable without a certain amount of forgetting;’ and I am glad to say that I have forgotten *much*.”

“Why should you endeavour to forget? Why are you so changed to me, Reginald?” she asked with an enormous effort. “What makes you so stern, so hard to me?” she faltered, laying a timid little hand on his. “Won’t you tell me?”

He would—he will—he is about to speak—he has thrown away the fern-stalk, and has taken her hand firmly in his own. Precisely at this critical moment a well-known voice exclaimed jovially:

“So here you are!” and Geoffrey suddenly appeared before them. “Fairly run to earth! A nice dance you’ve led me. None but a couple of regular professional flirts would have found out this cover. Alice, your partners are literally tearing each other to pieces in the ball-room, and unless you wish for *bloodshed* you had better be off—it’s really serious!” offering his arm. “You have five men waiting for the same dance.”

Oh, Geoffrey! Geoffrey! If you had only come five minutes later! Reginald dropped Alice’s hand like the traditional live coal, and Alice shrank back into her corner of the sofa at the first sound of her cousin’s approach.

“I’m engaged for this too,” said Reginald, rising and looking at his programme. “You will take Alice back to the ball-room, I suppose, then?” he observed, with extraordinary command of countenance; and,

turning away, he sauntered off, ostensibly in search of his own partner.

The ball was over ; people were leaving in crowds—the Fairfaxes among the first flight.

“ Alice,” said Geoffrey from his corner of the carriage, “ I am proud of you ; you took the shine out of them all to-night. *Now* I can believe in the old duke’s infatuation.”

“ What duke ? ” asked Miss Ferrars sleepily.

“ Have you never heard that the old Duke of St. Remo, old enough to be her great-grandfather, fell madly in love with my pretty little cousin when she was at Nice, and proposed in due form ? ”

“ Geoffrey, be quiet ; you are really very provoking. Do leave me alone,” crossly.

“ Don’t interrupt ; you know you are very *proud* of his scalp, though you would

not be a duchess. Is not his proposal kept among our family archives to this day?"

"Geoffrey! only I am so sleepy I would box your ears. Meanwhile, permit me to remind you of one word—the mystic word, *wait!*"

"Fancy, descending from a duke to a baronet! I am a deeply injured man. Only for your nonsense I might have been quoting 'My cousin, the duchess.' You would have made such a sweet little nurse. I daresay you would have been spoon-feeding the dear old fellow by this time, whereas, thanks to your heartless conduct, he has been hurried to an early grave."

"How foolish of you not to have accepted him, Alice," put in Mary, with lazy interest.

"Was she not? Miss Fane did all she could to make her; but she only cried and sobbed, and made no end of scenes; so she had to get her own way. You always

do get your own way, don't you, Lady Fairfax?"

But all this was thrown away on Alice, who was leaning back in her corner apparently fast asleep.

"Only we had to go in our war-paint, it was a very pleasant ball, wasn't it, Rex? I'm nearly smothered in this tunic. I suppose you, as my senior officer, would not hear of my taking it off, would you?"

"No," replied Reginald, with a yawn; "suppose you follow the general example and go to sleep. I'll excuse *that* if you like."

A very weary, drowsy party ascended the shallow steps of Monkswood, as the stars were disappearing and giving place to the gray dawn. With yawns and candles they all dispersed, leaden-footed, to their own apartments, to seek tired nature's soft restorer, sleep.

But there was little sleep for Sir Reginald, nor had he any apparent inclination to woo the fickle goddess, as he paced his long, low-roofed bedchamber from end to end.

“What did Alice mean, to-night?” he said to himself. “How weak I am where she is concerned! I was on the point of yielding; only for Geoffrey it was all over with me. Fancy a Fairfax breaking his word of honour—his oath! Well, in ten days’ time I may go; in ten days more I shall have made sufficient sacrifice to the shrine of public opinion, and in ten days I shall be out of the way of temptation.”

A knock at the door—an angry knock.

Enter to him Geoffrey, robed in a dressing-gown of blinding brilliancy.

“I say, Rex, are you doing sentry go? because, if *not*, will you have the goodness to remember that my room is under yours?”

Exit, with slam of door.

Reginald accepted the rebuke, and ceasing his promenade seated himself on the edge of his bed in a very dissatisfied frame of mind. He had miscalculated his strength on which he piqued himself. His iron will appeared a very flexible article to him now. He had thought himself man enough to remain at Monkswood, mixing daily and familiarly with Alice, unmoved and unruffled, the very embodiment of the typical iceberg; and now he found he could not bear it, it was too much for his self-control. How capricious she was! one morning full of solicitude for his safety, changing ere evening like the veriest weathercock. On rare occasions amazing him with a glimpse of her former self, as on the day after Helen's arrival (attributed by him to the immediate result of Helen's influence), and on the evening before the races. After that, the thermometer of her manners changed

from fair to freezing. But this evening again there had been a thaw. What did it mean? Better sustain an even temperament throughout as he did. She was ready enough to reproach him with harshness, to win him into good-humour with herself, to recur to the past as if there were no barrier between them, and that barrier wholly erected and sustained by her. Had she forgotten that he had sworn he would never be reconciled save on one condition? Not likely; she must remember it as well as he did himself.

“If I could believe that she cared for me,” he said, “it would be different. Once or twice I have been mad enough to think so, but only for a moment; cool reflection, and Alice’s subsequent treatment, effectually dispelled my illusions on that score. She never would have left me all those years without one line; she never would have given

me such a freezing reception, not one word of welcome for the present or regret for the past. Reginald Fairfax," he added aloud, as he rose and began to pull off his tunic, "listen to common sense, keep out of your wife's way, for you are a greater fool than I thought you ; keep aloof from her altogether, if you would wish to say when you leave this roof for ever, all is lost save *honour*. If she had had anything to say to you, it would have been said long ago. Sitting up all night won't mend matters. Sitting up all night won't make her ask you to forgive and forget ; she will never give in. And," after a pause and glancing at himself sternly in the glass, "if I know *you*, you'll never give in either." Having garrisoned his mind with this reflection, he followed the example of the household, and went to bed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOST WEDDING-RING.

THE morning after the ball, neither Mary nor Alice appeared at breakfast, nor did they descend till nearly luncheon-time. Helen Mayhew's portly figure was filling up a goodly portion of the open window, as she looked out on the terrace at Reginald playing with Maurice.

"Come here, Alice," she said, as Alice languidly entered the room. "Is it not a pretty sight to see Reginald with his little boy?"

Alice approached and looked over her

shoulder, and saw her husband leaning against the balustrade and making a small boat for Maurice, who, perched up beside him on the broad parapet, was watching his proceedings with the most lively interest, occasionally making suggestions and talking ceaselessly; the most thorough understanding between the pair was evident. Both faces were equally intent on the work in hand, and the resemblance between them was more striking than ever. Suddenly Reginald glanced up and saw Helen; lifting Maurice in his arms, he came closer to the window.

“Look at my boat,” cried Maurice, waving it towards her; “it’s going to be painted blue, and I’m to sail it this evening—he is going to show me;” ruffling up his father’s short locks with small tanned fingers.

Reginald set him down, and glanced from

him to Helen with a smile of unbounded pride, but catching sight of Alice the smile died away, and nodding her a cool good-morning, he turned away and led Maurice up the steps into the house.

“Why does he treat me so?” whispered Alice indignantly. “He never speaks of the child to me, and scarcely notices him when I am present, although he is my child—I am his mother; he spends hours with Maurice alone, and Maurice adores him. What does he mean? Is he afraid I would be jealous?”

“Ask him, my dear, ask him. Here he is, and here is luncheon,” she answered gaily.

“What shall we do this afternoon?” was the question that went round the table. “It’s too hot to ride, too hot for tennis. What shall we do?”

“Go and eat fruit in the garden,” suggested Geoffrey serenely.

"What, the *whole* afternoon?" exclaimed Reginald aghast.

"Let us first gather some fruit, and then go for a walk up to the top of Beecher's Hill," put in Miss Ferrars.

"Energetic young person! I admire, but I decline to emulate your pedestrian powers," said Geoffrey, putting up his eye-glass and gazing at her with calm approval.

"To Beecher's Hill we will go by all means," assented Helen. "I am quite in the humour for a nice stroll."

"It's a pretty steep stroll I can tell you! Don't expect me to pull you up the hill."

"I never expect any politeness from *you*, Geoffrey," she replied with a smile. "What a lazy, good-for-nothing boy you are! Let us all go and get ready; by the time we start it will be nearly four o'clock."

“But it would be madness to start now,” expostulated Alice; “think of toiling uphill in this broiling sun! Wait till it is a little cooler.”

“The walk in the sun will do Helen good. She wants severe exercise badly,” said Geoffrey, looking at her dispassionately. “If you were to put on a couple of sealskin jackets, Reginald’s poshteen, and my frieze ulster, you would be wise.”

“You are raving, my good Geoffrey! Too much dancing has affected your reason,” replied Mrs. Mayhew.

“I have method in my madness at any rate—the symmetry of your figure at heart,” responded the young man, with an air of deep interest.

“I’m not a bit stouter than Mrs. Russell, whom you profess to admire so much.”

“I don’t admire her at all! She is like a bolster tied in the middle,” remonstrated

Geoffrey vehemently. "She has a figure like a cottage loaf."

"You may as well make him a present of the last word, Helen," observed Alice, taking her by the arm and leading her out of the room. "There is no use arguing with him, he has *such* a tongue, and he is utterly unscrupulous as to what he says."

"People who live in glass houses should not throw stones," shouted Geoffrey.

"There !" exclaimed Alice, stopping with one foot on the stairs, "I knew it! I told you he would have the last word. No one can silence him but Reginald, and, to quote Geoffrey's own language, he shuts him up beautifully."

Five o'clock found the walking party reclining in various luxurious attitudes on the top of Beecher's Hill—they had evidently but recently arrived. Alice and

Geoffrey had scooped out a comfortable nest in the side of a haycock, without loss of time, and were resting after their joint labours.

Under an adjoining "wind" were the remainder of the party. Helen, much out of breath, was fanning herself with feverish energy; Mark presented a grotesque appearance, with loosened necktie, his head covered by a large straw hat, under which he had inserted an enormous cabbage-leaf, which drooped gracefully over his eyes. Prone at his feet lay Reginald, his hands clasped behind his head, his hat tilted far over his forehead—he looked the very embodiment of lazy comfort. Alice turned her attention for some time to the prospect that lay beneath her eyes—a truly English scene. Their own park was immediately below; beyond that, deeply embedded in trees, and merely discovering itself by the smoke from its cottages, a pretty little

hamlet tried to conceal itself; then came golden corn-fields, the spire of a Norman church, the steeple at Manister; a long low range of purple hills framed the horizon. It was a lovely summer's evening, the air was so clear one could see for miles; it was so still, that various curious insects in the grass and the booming of homeward-bound bees alone broke the silence.

Something tickling her neck made Alice abruptly turn her head; it was Geoffrey, of course, with a long piece of spear-grass, with which he had been diligently chasing hay-spiders. "Alice," he whispered, "let us go over quietly and topple the whole of the haystack over them, it will be no end of fun. I don't know which will be the most furious, Reginald or Helen. Come along," holding out his hand encouragingly; "it is an innocent pastime for an idle moment."

“No, no, Geoffrey ; you had better not, mind——”

“Well, will you promise to engage them in lively conversation whilst I go behind and loosen the whole concern ? When I cough I advise you to move.”

“I’ll have nothing to say to it. Do you think I am a school-girl ? I’m too old for such nonsense !” cried Alice irritably.

“I think you are in one of your tempers, that’s what I think,” returned her cousin in a tone of candid conviction.

“If you think so you are very much mistaken. You may dismiss *that* notion from your mind.”

“I’m sincerely glad to hear it. What was that you were saying to Reginald last night in the conservatory when I came on the scene ? He did not look a bit too well pleased to see me ? Alice, have you ever

begged his pardon for the way you treated him once upon a time ? Tell me all about it ; I know you are yearning to unbosom yourself to me," he added with an air of frank companionship, and sitting closer to her.

"Geoffrey, your impertinence is really intolerable !" exclaimed Alice haughtily, and colouring with anger. "You quite forget yourself !"

"Ah, I thought you were in a bad humour just now," he drawled ; "I know all the symptoms so well from sad experience ; so does Reginald, I am sure."

"Don't dare to speak to me, you have no *right* to talk to me in such a way, and I won't listen to you !" exclaimed Alice with flashing eyes.

"Little Spitfire !" ejaculated Geoffrey, surveying her crimson cheeks with calm derision.

Whereupon Alice indignantly turned her back upon him and withdrew into her own corner of the nest, where she sat in silent, dignified retirement. She could see that the others were spending their time far more agreeably, and sincerely wished that she was one of the party, but her pride forbade her to move. Mary was evidently telling them an amusing story with much animation and gesticulation. A low but highly appreciative laugh from Reginald, as the tale concluded, showed that he had been an attentive listener. Raising himself on his elbow, he contributed his share to the general entertainment in a few short sentences; whatever he had said found entire favour with his audience, and elicited peals of applauding laughter from all three, as he once more subsided, and drew his hat over his eyes.

“He never thinks it worth his while to

amuse *me* now," thought Alice, with a half-envious, half-wistful glance in that direction.

"I'm being devoured alive by midges!" suddenly exclaimed Geoffrey, jumping up and waving his handkerchief madly to and fro. "How you can stand them I can't imagine; they are in my hair!"—with frenzied rubbing of his lint-white locks—"my ears, my eyes! I shall go out of my mind if I stay here any longer! I say, Alice, can I speak to you now?"

"Depends altogether upon the topic you are going to broach," replied Alice in a frosty tone.

"Don't look so grumpy, my dear little girl," reaching out a hand to help her to rise, and of which she availed herself.

"And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain,"

quoted Geoffrey, dragging her into a perpendicular position.

“Come along down to the river and see if there are any trout rising.”

“There are none to rise.”

“There must be, it’s just their supper-time. Well, anything is better than squatting in the hay for the delectation of the insect world; come and look for a bees’-nest down in the bottom of the meadow.”

The hunt for the bees’-nest was fruitless. Alice, for one, brought neither zeal nor energy to the task. As they dawdled slowly homewards, Geoffrey suddenly said, as if struck by a brilliant idea:

“By Jove! next Tuesday the grouse shooting commences, the glorious twelfth! I don’t know how I’m to break the news to you, Alice; but on Monday we must part. Old Macfarlane has asked me this year, thank the kind fates, and his moors

and his shooting are simply—supreme. He asked Rex too, and was awfully keen about getting him, knowing him to be such a good gun—the old boy takes no end of pride out of his big bags—and only fancy,” standing in the pathway, and declaiming, with one waving arm, “he is *not* going. Did you ever know such a duffer? Imagine his refusing the primeest shooting north o’ Tweed! And for what? He gives no reason, and I can’t even hazard a guess. It certainly can’t be on *your* account,” contemplating his cousin with a cool, deliberate, speculative stare.

“If the question baffles your acute imagination, of course it is utterly beyond mine,” returned Alice, with an emphatic shake of her lovely head and a perceptible increase of colour. “See, Geoff,” she added eagerly, “the others are all going through the wood. We may as well go

too; I want some moss and ferns for the dinner-table."

Having joined the rest of the party, a general search for ferns commenced, and they were gradually moving homewards, when a masterly manœuvre of Geoffrey's left Alice and Reginald to bring up the rear alone—a most unpremeditated *tête-à-tête*.

As they crossed a rustic bridge that spanned a small but rapid torrent, they paused and looked down at the foam sailing along in solid-looking blocks; at the wet and mossy rocks, and the small noisy waterfall.

"How I should like to go down there and dabble!" said Alice, taking off her gloves.

In pulling off the left one she also drew off her wedding-ring, which instantly disappeared in the current below.

She looked after it, or rather at the spot where it had fallen in, in silent consternation; then, turning to her husband with awestruck face, exclaimed :

“My ring is gone! What *am* I to do?”

“I’m sure I can’t say,” he replied coldly.

“Can’t you fish it up some way—if you were to wade in?” she cried excitedly.

“I don’t know what *you* call wading, but the water there is at least nine feet deep, and your ring is probably a quarter of a mile off by this time,” he answered, with provoking indifference.

“But what am I to do for my wedding-ring?” she urged piteously, looking down at her hand with burning cheeks.

“Buy another, I conclude; you can get one for a guinea or thirty shillings. It depends upon whether you like them thick or thin. This will be your *third*, so you must have quite a settled opinion on the

subject," he replied, calmly aiming bits of gravel at a particular rock in the torrent below.

Certainly this was not encouraging behaviour; nevertheless, she braced up her courage, and determined to make one more attempt to recover her original ring.

"Give me my own ring, Reginald."

"I have already told you, Alice, that I will *not*," he returned, still pursuing his amusement.

"And will you never take me back as your wife?" she asked almost inaudibly.

"What do you mean?" he inquired, arresting himself in the act of taking aim, and turning towards her at last.

"What I say," she replied with more firmness.

"I shall be only too glad to take you back, as you call it, now—this instant."

“Do you really mean it?”

“Yes, of course I do; but have you not something to say to me besides,” he asked, looking at her anxiously.

Was ever anyone so blind to the right employment of great opportunities?

“No,” she replied innocently; “what more can I say than I have already said? I have nothing to say.”

“Than what you have already said!” he cried indignantly. “You dare to allude to it? you are not ashamed of it?”

“No,” she faltered, much bewildered.

Her husband scarcely heard her. His face was dark with passion; his voice vibrated with intense emotion as he added:

“Such a gratuitous repetition of insult I never heard of. You want an answer to your question; you want to know when I shall take you back? I give it to you in one word: *never*”—a long pause, during

which Alice stood dazed and stupefied—she felt as if a dark wave of trouble had overwhelmed her senses. “The day after to-morrow,” he proceeded firmly, “I am going to Looton. I shall take Maurice with me, to keep me company. You have had him for more than three years, remember,” he replied to the remonstrance he saw in her eyes. “I will send him back to you when I go down to Northampton, and you may keep him for the next four years.”

“What do you mean, Reginald?” interrupted Alice, struggling hard for composure, and fixing on him a strained, eager gaze.

“I mean that until Maurice is seven he may stay with you ; after that time I hope to have returned from India, and settled down at Looton, and I intend to have him to live with me. I am not going to be a wanderer all my life ; I owe some duties to my people, as well as to my country.

You will not mind parting with Maurice. You have shown me to-night plainly that you are utterly heartless."

"Do I understand," she faltered, supporting herself by the railing, "that you will take Maurice from me in four years' time?"

"Yes; legally I have a right to do so."

"I don't believe it," she cried passionately. "No law could be so wicked as to deprive me of my only child. What a cruel hard-hearted man you are to say such things to me. Can you be the Reginald Fairfax I married? Your voice and appearance are identical, but otherwise you are as different as night and day. *He* was only too good to me, he loved me far better than I deserved."

"He did indeed," interrupted her husband grimly.

"You," she pursued almost fiercely,

“have a heart like stone, a tongue like a sword. You are stern, harsh, implacable, tyrannical; you can’t be the same.”

“You are right,” he answered decisively; “I am *not* the original Reginald Fairfax; I am an older and wiser, if not better man. My illusions have been dispelled, my susceptibilities blunted, my eyes rudely opened. I know *you* to be an extraordinary combination of caprice, obstinacy, and inconsistency.” He broke off, and looked at her with a mixture of contempt and indignation; he dared not trust to speech.

“I don’t know what you mean; I have abased myself sufficiently, my conscience tells me,” she replied, with quivering lips. “You thrust me aside with scorn, and even add that you will take my child from me.” Here her grief overcame all considerations, and covering her face with her hands she burst into tears.

There was a very dark look on her husband's face as he surveyed her for some moments in silence; he was extremely angry with her; he thought she had befooled him again, played with his feelings as a cat with a mouse. He was wounded to the heart and bitterly disappointed. Each day he had been lingering on in hopes of one word of regret. With even *one* he would have been satisfied. To tell him she thought the same as ever was too much; it was inconceivable, it was impossible, it was maddening. "She must be a born actress," he thought as he stood opposite her. "This grief is all feigned." Still, as he watched the tears trickling through her fingers he relented somewhat. In the first place he could not endure to see any woman crying, much less Alice. She little knew what a powerful weapon she was using against

him. As he looked at her slight figure, heaving with half-suppressed sobs, his conscience smote him. He *was* hard, cruel, and tyrannical. After all she was only a girl, and a very frail, delicate one too. Was this the way to guard her as the apple of his eye, to restore her to health, to study every wish?—scarcely.

“Alice,” he said, gently removing her hands, “don’t cry like this; I can’t bear to see you.”

“Then, why do you make me cry?” she sobbed plaintively.

“I won’t do it again,” offering her his handkerchief; her own had gone home in Geoffrey’s charge, filled with moss and roots. “I never saw you cry before, and I hope I never shall again.”

“Then you won’t take Maurice from me,” she pleaded, raising her tear-stained face to his, with a look of passionate supplication.

"No, but you will lend him to me sometimes."

"Ye-es," very dubiously; "but you can always come here to see him."

"Pardon me, I never intend coming here again. Once I leave I shall never return."

"Never return!" The words seemed to echo and vibrate through the dim leafy silence of the surrounding trees.

"Oh, Reginald!"

"Now, Alice, you are never going to be so foolish as to cry for *that*," he asked roughly.

Sobs. What was he to do with her?

"Alice, why are you crying? You promised me that you would not."

They were now walking home; but Alice's supply of tears seemed unlimited. This was a new and alarming experience.

"Alice," he repeated, "you promised me you would not cry any more."

“Yes, but you promised”—gasp—“you would not make me cry”—gasp. “I know you think me no better than a baby, but I can’t help it—I can’t, indeed.”

More very bitter tears.

“Well,” said he, in despair, “if I come here for a few days at Christmas, will you be satisfied?”

“Yes,” she faintly whispered.

“Then dry your eyes; don’t let me see another tear. You have had your own way altogether, have you not?—tyrant as I am!”

“Yes,” she replied, with a sickly smile.

She looked so pale, dishevelled, and wan, that he felt absolutely guilty as he gazed at her forlorn-looking face.

Silently and rapidly they pursued the woodland path, where barely two might walk abreast. Above them the trees had laid their heads together, and combined in

league to keep out the sun. A stillness weighed on the surrounding woods; the wind had died away; the birds were silent. Not more silent than the bronzed young soldier and the pale agitated girl, who walked together, side by side.

Alice was in hopes of reaching her room unseen. But no such good fortune was in store for her. On the stairs she came face-to-face with Geoffrey, who, calmly surveying her tear-stained cheeks, gave a long and eloquent whistle, and chanted, as he passed downstairs :

“ But, children, you should never let
Your angry passions rise,
Your little hands were never made
To tear each other’s eyes.”

On entering the library, he found Reginald making lame excuses for Alice’s non-appearance to Helen, who was pouring

out tea. He boldly walked over to him and whispered right into his ear :

“ You’ve been bullying her, I see.”

Reginald’s indignant negative was completely thrown away on Geoffrey, who had already seated himself at the tea-table, under the shelter of Helen’s protection. So ended this disastrous walk.

Alice’s reflections as she stood at her window in the gloaming were not of a very rose-coloured hue. All that she most valued in this world—her husband’s love—had slipped from her grasp. The efforts she made to be reconciled were utterly in vain ; a cool, determined indifference met and repulsed all her advances ; advances which she afterwards blushed to remember, and propitiated her wounded pride by increased haughtiness and reserve.

“ It was hard to realise that he *was* her

husband," she thought, as very, very bitter tears welled up into her eyes. With what distant politeness and formality he treated her! If he unintentionally touched her, or brushed against her, he apologised as ceremoniously as if she were a stranger. He treated her as such, even though he had promised to be her friend. What would she not give to recall the reception she had given him? Too late to think of that now! he had taken her at her word—they were strangers. How would it all end? No matter what occurred, she could not well be more miserable than she was—a despised, disowned, detested wife!

CHAPTER VIII.

MARY JANE'S DISCOVERY.

"All yet seems well, and if it ends so meet,
The bitter past more welcome is the sweet."

It is a sultry August evening; Mary Jane, the upper housemaid, much refreshed by her comfortable tea, is sitting at an open window, gossiping with the head laundry-maid, and unpicking a brown merino dress, which she is praising to the skies.

"Real French, four shillings a yard. We all got dresses when Sir Reginald was married. I've had this three winters, and thanks to the lining, there's a good three

winters' more wear in it yet. I would have left it as it is, only it's old-fashioned you see," holding it up with a deprecating gesture. "Parker is going to lend me one of Lady Fairfax's for a pattern, that cream-coloured one; she had it on on Sunday."

"Eh," said her companion—whose fingers were equally busy, giving some startling finishing touches to a Dolly Varden hat—"but it will never suit *you*. You're too plump, Mary Jane; what looks well on a slip of a girl like her is nothing to go by; one of Miss Ferrars' dresses now would be more your style. That rose and gray thing, with the kilted skirt, and the plaster up the front, for instance. This brown, piped with red, and red bows like hers, would look fine and fashionable."

"Maybe you are right," replied Mary Jane, putting her thimble in her mouth

and looking at her friend reflectively. "I'll have a look at it this evening whilst they are at dinner. The gray one did you say?"

"See, here they come! the whole riding party!" exclaimed the laundry-maid with animation. Just look, Polly, and you'll see Sir Reginald will never offer to lift my lady off her horse, he leaves it to Mr. Geoffrey. See, there, I told you so! Ain't they just a queer couple? I can't make them out. If they were old, or if one of them was ugly even, you might understand. They do say," she continued confidentially, "as how Sir Reginald never meant to marry her, nor anyone, only she was his ward and he thought that it would be the best way to look after her, but that he don't care two straws about her; he hates womankind, Cox says."

"Well, I'm sure," replied Mary Jane, with a toss of her head, "if that sweet

young lady isn't good enough for him, I should like to know what he wants more! She's too good for him, I'm thinking; that's what ails him! He may be very handsome, and a great fighter—and he is a grand-looking young gentleman—but I think he treats her shameful, if all be true, never speaking to her nor looking at her no more nor if she were a marble statue set up in the corner. I'll never forget how good she was to me when I had a sore hand last winter, dressing it her own self every day, and always speaking to me so nice and kind all the time. Dear, dear! If Philip Banks was to turn out such a husband as hers I should cry off, I can tell you," she concluded, with a decided slap of her bare hand on the stone window-sill. "I did hear," she continued, "as how he was very fond of her once. I was sick and at home when they came

to Looton, but they say as he downright worshipped her just at first. Mrs. Morris herself told me, but I don't believe it. I never saw no signs of it. Seeing's believing to my mind. Laws! what's this in the lining? A letter, I declare! It must have run down from the pocket-hole. My stars, Johanna, whatever shall I do?" turning a very dismayed countenance to her friend. "It's a letter Lady Fairfax gave me to post a good three years ago to Sir Reginald. I remember now quite well reading the address. She seemed so terribly put out that the post-bag had gone, and as I was going down to the village, I offered to take it along with three or four from the servants' hall. I put them all in my pocket, and this has slipped into the lining instead. What *am* I to do?" she asked with breathless volubility.

"I would ask Mrs. Morris, if I were you.

There she is in the passage now ; run and catch her."

Mrs. Morris said :

"Take it to Sir Reginald after dinner, and tell him how it happened ; honesty is the best policy."

"Not for millions ! I'll take it to my lady, if you like. She could not scold if she tried ever so."

"He won't say a word to you either, Mary Jane. He is just his father all over. There never was a quieter nor a kinder master ; and, besides, how could anyone scold you for what was an accident ?"

"I tell you, Mrs. Morris, I'm afraid of my life of him. I see him every morning coming down before seven. He passes me just as if I was a sweeping brush. Now if it was Mr. Geoffrey—he always has a word and a joke—I'm not a bit afraid of *him* !"

“Mr. Geoffrey is a good deal too fond of joking and jesting with servants and keeping them from their work; and you will just take that letter and give it to Sir Reginald before you sleep to-night,” concluded Mrs. Morris authoritatively.

“But he looks so stern and severe, I shall just sink into the ground if he gives me one of those sharp looks of his.”

“Don’t you talk rubbish, Mary Jane; go and give up that letter after dinner, and be off to your rooms now.”

Dinner over, the laundry-maid came into the servants’ hall, and whispered to her reluctant friend:

“Now is your time, Polly. They are all in the pleasure-ground except Sir Reginald, and he’s writing in the library, Thomas says. Just you go and give a knock at the door, and hand in the letter; he can’t *eat* you. I’ll

go with you as far as the swing-door," she added generously, "and wait."

With loudly-beating heart, Mary Jane arrived at the library-door, knocked, and entered. Her master was writing at a table by the light of a reading-lamp. He looked up, and gazed into the shadow for some seconds before he exactly made her out.

Then, laying down his pen, he said :

"Well, what is your business? One of the servants, are you not?"

There was more of the "orderly-room" in his manner than was altogether pleasant. His dealings with soldiers' wives were short, sharp, and decisive; the very unruly women of the Seventeenth Hussars were more afraid of three words from the Major than a hundred from the Colonel.

He imagined that Mary Jane had come to lodge some complaint, so he repeated :

“What can I do for you? what do you want?”

“Please sir, I’m Foster, the upper housemaid, and it’s about this letter,” said she, timidly approaching, and laying down the yellow, crumpled missive.

“A letter,” he repeated carelessly, taking it up; but seeing the superscription, he changed colour. “And *where*, may I ask, did you get this?”

“Please sir, Lady Fairfax gave it to me to post more than three years ago. It must have slipped down between the lining of my dress and the pocket. I found it just now when I was ripping up the skirt. I’m very sorry indeed, sir, for I remember now that Lady Fairfax was very particular about it. I made sure I had posted it with the others.”

“Well, at any rate it was not your fault,” he exclaimed, after some reflection,

turning over the long looked for letter in his hand. "It was honest of you to bring it to me; you might have burnt it, and said nothing about it; and it happens to be a letter of the very greatest consequence. Here," said he, unlocking a drawer, "is a note instead," handing her ten pounds; "and see that your pockets have no holes in them in future."

Mary Jane received the gift with profuse and voluble thanks, as she backed and curtsied out of the room; and from that time forward declared that her master was the nicest, pleasantest, most generous gentleman in England.

It is needless to say that Sir Reginald lost no time in tearing open the letter, which ran as follows:

"MY DEAR HUSBAND,

"You will be surprised to get a

letter from me, considering my very recent heartless wicked treatment of you, and more surprised still to hear that I am writing to entreat your forgiveness. Ever since you left I have been so very, very miserable, and as each day has passed I have been more firmly convinced of your innocence, and that I have been the most unjust and ungenerous of wives. You will, I know, make allowance for my youth and a naturally jealous hot temper. These are but feeble excuses; no one but you, who have always been so good to me, would entertain them for an instant. I sometimes think I must have been mad; any way, whatever *you* may do I shall never forgive myself. But you will pardon me, I know; not only because of your promise, but because—how can I tell you? I had a bad fainting fit the other day, and Morris was frightened and sent for the doctor; he

says that before summer, all being well, there will be a little inmate in the nursery here. I have not told this great secret to anyone, neither must you. Long before summer your letter will have come, won't it? Once this has fairly started, I shall count the very days till the answer comes back. If none comes I will know that you *cannot* forgive me, and indeed I don't deserve that you should. But you *will* write to me a kind letter too, my darling Regy. Think how very lonely I am, I have no one but you in all the world. The post is just going out, so I must conclude. I direct this by the address you left with Helen, so it will be sure to reach you safely. Mind you write by return mail to

“Your loving and penitent wife,

“ALICE FAIRFAX.”

When he had read this to the end he laid it down, and began to pace about the room in great agitation.

“What a brute I must seem to her! What must she have thought of me all these years? Why, no later than yesterday”—he paused in his walk, overwhelmed with the recollection—“I rejected her overtures for peace. I was savagely rude to her. My poor little Alice, you had indeed said quite enough, more than enough,” he muttered, resuming his walk. “What must she think of me? How can she have borne with me all this time? I refused, yes, point-blank, to kiss her, idiot that I was. I might have guessed at something of this kind, only that my devilish pride had strangled my common sense; and all this frightful misunderstanding was owing to this wretched bit of paper, this letter,

that I would have given five years of my life for, and she, poor girl, has been breaking her heart about, and all the time it has been lying inside the skirt of that woman's dress. After all," he continued, taking it up, "it is a very dear and precious letter; I would not part with it, late as it comes, for a field-marshal's bâton." He read it twice over again, lingering on almost every word, then folded it up very carefully and put it in his waistcoat-pocket as he walked to the window. "No wonder," said he, "she gave me a cool reception; I wonder what sort of one she would give me *now* if I could catch her alone? She ought to hate me pretty well by this time, it is not *my* fault if she does not. But she likes me a little bit still. She must, or she never could have stood the way I have treated her. If she only cares for me just one

quarter as much as I care for her we shall do very well," he thought to himself joyfully, as he stepped out of the window and joined the party who were sitting in the pleasure-ground, basking in the moonlight, and inhaling the soft bracing air, heavy with the perfume of syringa, roses, and new-mown hay.

Mr. and Mrs. Mayhew, Miss Saville, and Mary were reposing in various garden-chairs.

"Where is Alice?" asked her husband abruptly.

"Oh, she and Geoffrey have gone to gather pears for the public weal."

"What, at this hour!" he exclaimed, standing at the top of the steps, gazing after two figures who were rapidly disappearing in the direction of the garden. "Small chance of a *tête-à-tête* with Alice to-night," he said to himself as he pulled his moustache thoughtfully.

Five minutes later, Geoffrey came running back alone; breathlessly he jerked out: "*Such* a trick as I've played her! She offered to race me to the big pear-tree, each starting from the garden-gate, and going one north the other south; I agreed, and when I saw her well started south I just came home! What a state she will be in when she finds herself alone at the end of the ghost-walk! She says she is *not*, but I believe she is, horribly afraid of ghosts and bogies; and if she meets the cavalier who is said to stalk about the garden won't it be fun? I only wish I had thought of it in time, I'd have dressed up. It pays her off nicely for some of the pretty little jokes she has practised on me. It's not too late yet"—snatching up a shawl and a garden-hat and commencing a toilet.

"I can't say that I exactly see the

humour of the situation," said Reginald, as, springing down the steps and vaulting lightly over an iron railing, he set off by a short cut to the garden at a run.

"Active fellow, is he not?" observed Geoffrey, removing the shawl in which he had already enveloped himself. "But this alacrity in joining his wife, in the present overcharged state of the domestic atmosphere, is something quite new. The sky is not going to fall, is it?" he added, looking up interrogatively.

"No; but really, Geoffrey, you shouldn't have left her," remonstrated Helen. "The garden is an awful eerie place by moonlight, I should not care to take a solitary walk there myself."

The pear-tree, which was to have been the goal, was the pear-tree *par excellence* of the whole garden; it was trained along

a wall covered with fruit-trees, beneath which ran a broad gravel terrace, approached by several flights of steps, one of which was exactly opposite this particular tree.

Alice, breathless and triumphant, had arrived first at the foot of the steps. She looked up and down the broad walk; no sign of Geoffrey.

“How very odd,” she thought.

Presently she heard his rapidly-approaching footsteps, and, mounting the terrace, began to gather pears with much deliberation. Hearing him arrive, she never troubled to turn her head, merely remarking as she reached up for a lovely, yellow, corpulent pear:

“Snail! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I could trundle a wheelbarrow faster than you can run.”

“Could you indeed?” replied her husband, putting his arm round her slender waist.

“Geoffrey, how dare—— Reginald !” she gasped, dropping all the pears.

“*I may dare, may I not?*” said he, taking her in his arms and giving her twenty kisses. “Look here,” said he, smiling at her indignant eyes and crimson cheeks, “I’ve just had a letter from you, my darling,” producing the letter and hurriedly telling her the story.

“And the other one I wrote to Afghanistan ?” she asked breathlessly.

“That I never heard of till now ; the Afridis made short work of our letters.”

“Then you have never had a line from me till to-day ?” she cried, backing towards the wall and looking at him with dilated eyes.

“Never, since I left Cannes.”

“Then oh, Regy, *what* must you have thought of me ?”

“Just what I have been asking myself, *what* can you have thought of me ? No

wonder you called me harsh, cruel, and tyrannical; such names were too mild a term for me. What an unmanly, vindictive wretch I must have appeared! And you, you richly deserve the name of the 'patient Grizzel.' Don't you think so?" drawing her towards him by both hands. "Come, tell me what you thought of me for never answering your letter."

Too overwhelmed to speak, she stood dumb before him, with both her little trembling hands in his.

"You can't think," he went on, "how I hoped and hoped for even one line, after that Cheetapore affair had been cleared up. Surely then I learnt that 'hope deferred maketh the heart sick.'"

Seeing the ready tears in Alice's eyes he stopped.

"Why, you little goose, you are never going to cry *now*, are you? It was not

your fault I did not get your letter. I have it safe now, and I am the happiest man in England this instant; that is to say," lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "if you will forgive me, Alice, and if you love me still?"

"Forgive you!" she echoed, speaking with an effort, "it is for you to forgive *me*. Do forgive me," she pleaded, with lovely beseeching eyes; "it cost me more than *you*. My punishment seemed at times greater than I could bear."

At the mere recollection of what she had endured, two large tears that could no longer be suppressed escaped from her eyelashes, and rolled down her pale cheeks.

"My Alice, my love, you were forgiven long, long ago; only it seemed to me, till now, that you did not want my forgiveness. You would not speak, and I could not; I tied my hands most effectually that day on

Southsea pier. And, after all, Alice, you would not have respected me if I had not required some apology, or if I had tendered you a forgiveness you had never asked for, after the way you broke up our home and turned me adrift. No, my darling," in answer to a piteous look, "I am not scolding you. I never, never will be rough or rude to you again, if you will promise to forgive me for the barbarous way I have treated you lately. When I think of the thousand-and-one rudenesses I've been guilty of—intentionally too—I feel that I am asking a great deal. If I had only your capacity for blushing, you would see how thoroughly ashamed I feel. Am I to be forgiven?" leaning towards her.

"Of course you are."

"And," speaking still more earnestly, "you like me a little in spite of all?"

A deep blush was his only answer for

some seconds ; then, with an effort, she raised her truthful eyes to his, and said :

“ You know I do ; you need not have asked. It is,” she pursued, with emotion, “ far more a question whether—whether you care for me. I know you never will, never can, as you once did ; but it has seemed to me at times that you almost hated me.”

“ Indeed ? ” with a beaming smile long foreign to his countenance ; “ I see you are more easily imposed upon than ever. You know very well, it is patent to even Geoffrey, that I have always loved you exactly three times better than you love me. It is not in your nature to love as I do, though I never make much fuss about my feelings ; still you may as well know that you are more to me, ten times over, than anything in the world. Even at the worst of times it has always been the same.

What troubled me most, when I thought I was dying, was, *not* my many sins and shortcomings, *not* the thought of a future world, *not* what ought to come first with all of us, my soul ; no, it was you, that I might only see you once more, even for an instant, was the prayer, the thought, that never left me night or day. I will not conceal from you, Alice, that I did my very best to stifle recollection, to forget you, to throw my whole heart into my profession. It was no good ; nothing, not a draught of the Egyptian nepenthe itself would have banished you from my heart. When I first went to India I used to take long headlong rides, half in hopes of galloping away from my thoughts, half in hopes of killing myself. I sometimes think I was a little mad then."

"Reginald, you must have been," she exclaimed with conviction.

“ Yes ; you don’t half know how miserable I’ve been without you. Well, I quieted down in time, and when the fighting came off I took it out of myself in that way. But wherever I was, you were seldom absent from my mind ; whether alone in my quarters, or sitting round a noisy camp fire, or on a still starry night, on the line of march, your face was ever before me. As to never caring for you as before, I believe I love you better—yes, better than when we were first married ; though had anyone suggested such a possibility at the time, I would have throttled him on the spot. But do not,” he continued with a smile, “spread the fact among the young married ladies of your acquaintance ; they might try and follow your example, with scarcely such happy results. Lovers, quarrels are not *always* the renewing of love.”

"How can you joke on such a subject, Regy?" she asked almost inarticulately.

"Well, then, I'll be serious once more. Never, as long as you live, doubt my love for you, Alice. Do you believe in it now?"

"I do," she whispered, "and you have made me very, very happy."

"Then you can't refuse to make *me* happy! You have not given me one kiss yet, remember, and you have three years' arrears to make up. To begin with, I'll take the one you offered me the other night now."

"I daresay you will," she replied demurely, with a spice of her old spirit. "Have you ever heard, 'He that will not when he may,' etc.? And you took quite enough just now to last you for a long time," she added, with a deep blush.

"You are not going to put me on allow-

ance, are you? I tell you plainly I won't stand it. After offering me a kiss you never can again pretend you are shy. Now, candidly, *can* you? I'm afraid you are a little impostor," quietly insinuating his arm round her waist.

"I see you are as great a tease as ever, at any rate, Reginald," she exclaimed tragically. "If you ever dare to allude to my foolish, idiotical offer, I won't say what I shall do to you. I am not an impostor, and you know very well I *am* shy; you often said it—it——"

"Well, go on, I would not commence a sentence I was afraid to finish if I were you!"

"Well, that it was my only fault—there!"

"And so it was; and as you are cured now of course you are perfect."

A silence. At length she said:

“Were you really going away to-morrow, Regy?”

“Yes, indeed I was. I have been lingering on here from day to day, hoping for one little word, just one, and it did not come. I would have gone back into the world a hard, embittered, cynical man. You smile, you think I am that already?”

“Tell me, Regy, will you be the very same Regy I knew of old, and will the rude, cold, stern guardian I have met lately, and—I tell you in confidence that I am a little afraid of—will he go?”

“He will,” replied her husband, with quiet decision. “He will take his departure along with the haughty young lady with whom he gets on so well. Are you sorry? Are you sorry to lose your guardian and find your husband?”

“Sorry!” she repeated, taking the flower out of his button-hole with the calmest air

of rightful appropriation. "Do I *look* sorry? By-the-way, for the third time of asking, you may as well give me my wedding-ring" —fastening the flower in the front of her dress, and holding out a small white palm. "How glad I shall be to see it again," she exclaimed, as she eagerly watched him disengaging it from his chain.

"Here it is," handing it to her; "it is a travelled ring."

"Let me see"—turning it to the moonlight and scrutinising it closely—"if it is my own. Yes, there is the 'R. A.' entwined. Now please to put it on."

"Alice," he said, taking her little ringless hand in his and slipping it on her finger, "remember, you are not to remove it again."

"I never will, you may be very sure, as long as I live, and when I die it shall

be buried with me. See, it is quite too big for me now," holding up her hand.

"It is indeed," he reluctantly owned to himself, as he looked at the fragile, almost transparent fingers held up for his inspection. An agonising thought flitted through his brain and turned his heart, as it were, to ice. "Had he gained her but to lose her after all?"

"Why do you shiver?" cried Alice gaily. "Why do you look so odd—you are not ill, are you?"

"Ill? Not I!" recovering himself with an effort. "It is probably your friend the goose walking over my grave."

"Don't talk of graves," she said with a shudder, drawing nearer to him involuntarily, and laying her hand on his shoulder. "You don't know," she added in a low voice, "what a good wife I am going to be. You have given me back my wedding-

ring, and in return I promise solemnly to be truthful, loving, and obedient as long as I live. Nothing but death can ever come between us now," she added tremulously, as, stealing her arm round his neck, she gave him the tenderest and shyest of kisses.

"You little witch!" he exclaimed, returning it with interest. "Do you know that that is almost the first kiss you have ever given me of your own accord, Lady Fairfax? What a change a few hours can make in one's life! This morning, mine seemed so empty, so cheerless; just what it has been for the last three years. I had no one to look after, or care about much, except myself, and I am not very fond of myself; sometimes, I know all my faults quite as well, nay, far better than you do."

"What are they?" she asked with a smile. "Let us compare notes."

“I am determined to the verge of obstinacy, and beyond it. Proud to a degree little short of insanity. Overbearing, supercilious, tenacious, I would die sooner than yield, once I have made up my mind that I am in the right. If I had been less blinded by my pride, I would have written to you when Maurice was born, and saved us both two long miserable years. How can I ever make amends to you, my darling? How can I ever overtake these years I have left you alone?”

“Hush!” she said, “you must not abuse yourself. “It has been all my fault from first to last; it is only like you to take the blame, but you know very well it all lies at *my* door. But, indeed, indeed I have been punished, and justly punished! I ought to have trusted you, Reginald; if I had followed my first impulse I would have

spared myself many a bitter tear. I seem to have been under some malign influence, and to have had an absolute vocation for making you and myself miserable, that awful winter that seems so many years ago. Since then, Time has crawled by and brought no remedies for *me*—a blank empty future, and nothing to look back on but hateful haunting recollections; only for Maurice I must have gone melancholy mad. You will never leave me again, will you?

“You won’t go to Looton now?” she added suddenly.

“Yes; in fact I must. I’ll run down there for a few days and see how everything is getting on, look into the accounts, ride over the home farm, etc., and tell them to be ready for us at Christmas.”

“At Christmas?” she echoed in amazement.

“Yes. I shall then come back here and

take you off abroad for the next three months. You were talking of Nice the other day : will you accept *me* as a companion instead of your aunt ? How would you like to spend the autumn in Italy ? ”

“ And Maurice ? ”

“ Oh, Maurice will be made over to Helen ; she will take excellent care of him. He has had a very good time the last two years ; it’s *my* turn now. I must have you all to myself, no rivals, small or large, which is one reason why I don’t want to settle down at home just at present. We should have nothing but one scene of visiting, feasting, and mutual entertainments. Whereas, roaming about abroad, we can scorn all social claims, spend our time as we please, and, if the worst comes to the worst, pretend we are bride and bridegroom. If you are a good girl and get

strong and well by Christmas, I shall bring you home again; if not, I shall take you on to Egypt."

"Egypt!" she echoed. "Why Egypt? And why do you sigh, Regy, and look at me so wistfully?" she asked, raising her gray eyes to his fond dark ones, that seemed to brim over with a look of anguish she could not understand.

"I did not sigh," he replied mendaciously. "And why not go to Egypt? You know you have always had a craving to out-travel Helen and to see the old Nile. Come, it is getting late, I cannot let you stay out any longer; the dew is falling, you must go in."

"Ah! I see you have had enough of me already," she replied with a pretty little shrug. "Tell me, Regy, who have you got in this locket?—you never used to wear one."

“Who do you think—are you jealous? A Begum who took rather a fancy to me,” he said, opening the case and revealing herself. “As long as I had the original I never wore it of course. I believe this locket is a kind of talisman; it has been twice into action, for I never left it out of my possession night or day.”

They were slowly promenading up and down the centre garden-walk, now stopping for an instant, now again going on, this time very, very leisurely, as it was the very last turn they were to take. On this point Reginald was resolute, although he grudged sorely to shorten the happiest hour he had known for years. Oblivious of all the world, and absorbed in each other, they were approaching the gate, which suddenly burst open, and Geoffrey, singing, “Alice, where art thou?” appeared.

“I’ve been sent,” he shouted, “to know

if you mean to roost in the pear-tree? *Where* are the pears?" he added imperiously. "Why, what's all this? I do believe," looking from one to the other, "that you two have buried the hatchet, come off the war-path, and smoked the pipe of peace!"

"Yes, wise and observant Geoffrey, you are right for once. We have been the victims of an unfortunate accident that has cost us both very dearly," replied Reginald gravely.

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" cried Geoffrey, dancing a war-dance round them, concluding with three wild bounds into the air.

"I really must embrace you, my dear Regy. You know I'd twice as soon have you as Alice." So saying he flung himself on Reginald *à la Française*.

"No no, my dear fellow, you really must excuse me," pushing him back. "If

you must kiss somebody, you may kiss Alice; and for your kind congratulations, conveyed, I presume, by those wild evolutions just now, receive my warmest thanks. Also," he added more seriously, "for all your well-meant but unsuccessful endeavours to reconcile us, all the *tête-à-tête* rides and walks you contrived. Only you are not an old woman, you would make a superb chaperone."

A less shrewd observer than Geoffrey could see that this assumed gaiety covered a deeper emotion Reginald could hardly conceal.

"Well, here, Alice, is a kiss for you, by your lord and master's kind permission."

"Imagine you have had it, it will do as well," cried Alice, waving him away with both hands.

"All right," replied Geoffrey, rather huffed. "Imagination is no doubt better

than reality in this particular instance. I always knew if anyone could manage you, or get you along at all in double harness, it was our right honourable friend. But you must confess you jibbed frightfully at starting. Plenty of the whip, that's what you all want.

'A woman, a dog, and a walnut-tree,
The more you beat them the better they be.'

Isn't that so ?”

“Geoffrey !” exclaimed Alice, “have you taken leave of your senses ! If people were to see you whooping and springing about they would certainly think we kept a private lunatic asylum, and that you were one of our most dangerous patients. Do be cautious, the moon is at the full !”

Reginald having started off to fetch the pears, Geoffrey watched him out of sight, and then said : “Alice, my good girl,

seriously and soberly, I never was so glad of anything in all my life. He is the best fellow I ever knew, and ten times too good for you."

"No one knows that better than myself," she replied meekly, to Geoffrey's unbounded surprise.

"Good-night, Geoff; I'm going. Tell him to tell them; I couldn't," she added, vanishing through the gateway.

"Alice has gone, Rex," said Geoffrey, "and you are to break it gently to the family. No one could eat pears now: leave them on the garden-seat and come along. You and Alice are the only *pair* they will think of to-night."

In a few minutes they had rejoined the party in the pleasure-ground.

"Well, what has kept you? Have you brought the pears?" inquired Helen, languidly.

"No; but I have brought you a piece of good news instead. You can guess what it is, can you not?"

"I can, my dear Regy," she replied, rising hastily—her active mind having grasped the truth in one second—and kissing him with effusion. "I know there is only one thing that could make you look so happy. Where is Alice?"

"This," said Geoffrey with mock gravity, taking Reginald's unwilling hand, "is Petruchio. Katharina has retired. In plain English, Alice was too bashful to return herè, and desired me to accept your congratulations as her deputy. I've no doubt, Helen, that you and Miss Ferrars will find her in her room."

Helen and Miss Ferrars were not long in acting on this hint, and found Alice sitting in the window-sill in the moonlight, leisurely unplaiting her long, golden-brown

plaits. She received them with smiles and tears.

“I knew you would come,” she said, throwing herself into Helen’s arms; “you have always been our good genius. You have heard it all from him, have you not?” she whispered.

“Only a sketch—a mere outline,” Helen replied, seating herself. “I have a vague idea that you are going abroad, that I am to have charge of Maurice, and that we are all to meet at Looton at Christmas. The moment I saw Regy’s face I knew what had happened. Dear boy! it does one good to see him looking like himself once more.”

The three ladies remained talking together till the small hours, much to the detriment of Alice and Mary’s roses, and the tale of the lost letter was told and re-told, deplored and discussed, at least ten times over.

The next morning Reginald started for Looton, and within a week Sir R. and Lady Fairfax were among the fashionable departures for the Continent, and the party at Monkswood dispersed, to reunite at Christmas.

CHAPTER IX.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

It is the end of the first week in January—bleak, black January! Outside Looton the snow is falling lightly but persistently; already it is a foot deep in the park. It is a bitterly cold, dreary, dark evening. Not a single living creature is abroad that can possibly find shelter. What a night for the homeless—what a night for the miserable starving birds!

Inside Looton the prospect is much more cheerful. A huge log fire is roaring up the chimney of the great hall, lighting

up the frames of dingy-looking portraits, reflecting itself in more than one dented steel cuirass and battered casque, and generally illuminating the arms and armour of many a dead and gone Fairfax.

A large mastiff lies luxuriously at full length on a tiger-skin before the fire ; but of other living inmates the room is empty. The letter-box stands on the table ; no one is looking—let us have a peep. Here is an epistle from Mrs. Mayhew to Miss Saville, which will doubtless tell us all the family news.

“Looton, *Jan. 5th.*

“MY DEAR MISS SAVILLE,

“I am quite ashamed of myself for never having answered your kind New Year's letter. But you have *no* idea what a whirl we have been living in since Christmas. I never seem to have a moment to myself.

“Nearly all the party have gone out skating to-day—an amusement not at all in *my* line—so at last I have an hour to devote to my many indignant correspondents.

“You have heard from Alice frequently, of course, and I am sure she has told you how much we have missed you, and how disappointed she and Regy have been at your absence. It is really too bad of your old enemy, rheumatism, to seize on you just at this time.

“We have had such a Christmas! Reginald and Alice determined that, as it was the *first* they had ever spent together, they would celebrate the occasion properly. There was a dinner to the tenantry, to whom Maurice was duly presented in the character of the heir. Theatricals and a ball entertained the *grandees*; nor were the poor forgotten—beef, coals, warm

clothes, and money were lavishly bestowed on every side. The master and mistress of Looton are so happy themselves, they do their very best to spread that rather scarce commodity in all directions, and share it with rich and poor, as far as money and kind words and deeds can go.

“You will like to hear all about Alice and Regy from a third party, especially as I know how reticent Alice is about herself—her letters are probably filled with Maurice and Reginald, Reginald and Maurice.

“Four months in Italy have worked wonders for her. She has completely recovered her blooming cheeks, her gay spirits, and, above all, her health. She still looks a mere girl in her teens, and as little of the matron as ever. I have done my best to put a stop to her hunting, but it is of no use, especially as she has Regy’s

permission and countenance. He only takes her when the distances are moderate and the country to match, and as she is always superbly mounted, and well looked after and piloted by her husband, I don't think you need be nervous; and I must say they both enjoy it so much, and look so supremely happy when setting out together on a hunting morning, that it seems almost a pity to make any more protests.

“Reginald is a changed man—no longer silent, morose, and cynical; he is my own dear light-hearted Regy once more, and enters into everything with as much zest and spirit as Geoff himself. A happier couple than he and Alice could not be found. It is a pleasure to see them together. She runs a good chance of being completely spoiled, only for her sweet, unselfish disposition. She is allowed

her own way in everything. Fortunately it is Reginald's way too, so there is no harm done. Their opinions, wishes, and tastes seem to be identical. Some day or other Alice's individuality will be completely lost and absorbed in Reginald's stronger mind and will. I tell him this sometimes, and make him extremely angry. I am keeping our great piece of news to the last, as a *bonne bouche*. I am sure you will be interested to know that Captain Vaughan and Mary Ferrars are engaged. He has been here since the first week in December, and their happiness is now of a whole week's standing. They seem to be very well suited and mutually in love. He confided to me that it was the extreme felicity of Reginald and Alice that had encouraged him to follow *their example*. This time last year who would have believed that they would be the couple—

of all others—to lure their friends into matrimony? At times I feared a very different conclusion. However, they fully bear out the good old saying, ‘All’s well that ends well.’

“With love and best wishes for the New Year, ever, dear Miss Saville,

“Yours affectionately,

“HELEN MAYHEW.”

THE END.

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